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OR, HUSTLING FRISCO HOODLUMS.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "THE RIVAL ROVERS," "UNCLE
BEDROCK'S BIG BOUNCE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BEDROCK GETS INTO BUSINESS.

HORACE DELANGDON was the name by which Lewis Stafford, the millionaire and railroad magnate, was wont to introduce him, and he was as aristocratic in appearance as in cognomen, when seen under such circumstances.

He made a temporary stay in San Francisco after his return from the mining regions, where he had accomplished work which Stafford chose to consider worth to him a hundred thousand in gold; and having been "let in on the ground

"EZ WHARFORE SHOULD I GIT?" MEETLY QUERIED BEDROCK, AS HE QUIETLY DEPOSITED
A REVOLVER ON THE LEDGE.

floor" had speculated in the brief season before the absorption of the S. B. O. and K. to such good purpose that he was now worth a quarter of a million.

Yet this identical individual, only a few weeks before this story opens, was known as Ragged Rufe, as Uncle Bedrock, as Rufus Primrose; and appeared to be a very king-pin among tramps. He looked, talked and thought that character to perfection, though he had made more than one fortune in his time before pulling in this last coup which once more established him on a good financial basis.

If some of the rich men of the city could have seen him in his role of walking philosopher they might not have been willing to so cordially accept the introductions Stafford was showering right and left.

The fact was, the railroad king really liked the man, strange as it might seem to one who knew the seamy side of DeLangdon's life; and at the same time was enjoying hugely the practical joke which he considered he was playing.

"Good-by, then," DeLangdon was saying.

"I did not need this last bit of attention to convince me of your good will. I have had a pleasant as well as profitable visit here, and it has just about toned me up to the pitch of meeting my family once more. If I was not afraid it would simply be trespassing on your time I would write you my impressions of the East. So long has it been since I left there it will be something of a *terra incognita*, and I am afraid I will find it even more lonesome than the canyons of the Sunken River."

"Write, by all means. And don't try to apologize for taking me away from business. I am bound to have some pleasure in the world. To tell the truth, I could not trust you alone, for fear you would get switched off on some new scheme. I vowed I would see you fairly started, so as to be sure you were leaving—and I hope for good—the questionable life which seems to have such irresistible attractions for you."

DeLangdon laughed cordially.

"Never fear. I am taking a spell off, at the least. And when I think the matter over I fancy I have done some good at odd times—perhaps more than if I had been one of the straight-laced ones. I may have led a jagged sort of life when on the road, but I was never demoralized, or spoiled, in any way. My nerves are just as good, and wits just as sharp as they ever were, while you can judge whether I can or cannot grace a swallow-tail coat with the best of them. I am going back as a rich, and therefore much-to-be-respected member of the community. It may be years before I break out again and get the old run of the hills. When I do break loose again you will be apt to know it, since I would return to my stamping-ground and Uncle Bedrock would be on deck once more."

"That is what I am afraid of, that is what I am afraid of. But, I will hope for the best. Good-by."

They separated at the ferry, and DeLangdon went drifting across the bay, imagining himself at last on the straight and narrow road which would within the week, lead him to the bosom of his family.

So it would have done, no doubt, had it not been for a little accident which occurred.

At Oakland he busied himself for a few moments, arranging himself for the trans-continental journey, and then, finding there was still a trifle of time to spare, went out to look around.

A good many years ago he had been in the place, when it was getting ready to boom; and he wanted to see what changes had occurred that would be visible at the glance he would give them.

He saw no changes, however. He was too much occupied with something else.

Very much to his surprise he found himself almost instantly in the thick of a broil, which had arisen with a suddenness almost bewildering.

Three men were at one, and, to make the odds the more heavy, the three were all brawny ruffians, well-trained to the work, while the one man was young in years, and rather slenderly built.

However, though evidently taken by surprise, he was giving such a good account of himself that DeLangdon was delighted.

"One of the times when a gun would be orthodox with the most straightfisted of the Puritans"—that was his first thought. His next was, "Is no one going to interfere? The scoundrels evidently mean murder, and—"

He sprang forward, as by an irresistible impulse.

The young man handled his fists with a skill that showed some scientific training, and accepted his punishment with gameness. Before he well knew what was coming he had received a blow which sent him staggering back; but he was ready for the next man, and, parrying his blow struck straight out with such force that the man who received the stroke was stretched out at full length, while the young stranger, plunging forward, struck again, left and right, each hit staggering a ruffian.

It looked as though there was a chance of his getting away with the whole party.

But, the fellow who was down did not stay down. He was used to receiving punishment, and it would take more than one such blow to 'knock him out.'

He sprang to his feet, and rushing forward struck a fearful blow with a billy which he produced as he rose.

Either the young man saw him coming, or instinct warned him, for he turned partially, and guarded as he turned, at the same time throwing his head a little back.

The billy descended, but missed his head.

Instead, the stroke landed on his right arm, which dropped powerless by his side, just when he needed it most. All three of his assailants were coming at him again, and in the rush the young champion went down.

"Tramp him!" growled the man with the billy, and all three proceeded to put the idea into execution.

The boot of the speaker was just reaching the side of the helpless victim when DeLangdon struck in.

He 'sailed in' without warning, and let drive as hard as he knew how.

With such fellows as these the rules of fair dealing hardly required him to give notice. He had his men well bunched together, and in the briefest time imaginable had reached them all.

Down they went, one after the other, and by this there was a rush to the spot, and the evil trio, rising to their feet, started to sneak off.

DeLangdon's hand darted around to where his pistol used to swing, and had it been in place they would hardly have made good their escape.

"One of the penalties of respectability," he muttered. "Tools all in a hand-sachel, and the sachel in charge of the porter. I'll rearrange that at once. I see there are emergencies here just as important as those in the big hills."

He had done his duty, and was about to withdraw modestly when he noted that the young man did not rise, and that no one appeared to care to assist him.

"Reckon this hyer are a case fur Onkle Bedrock," he muttered to himself, forgetting his broadcloth at once.

"Wonnerfull how Perovidense does send ther pure, onadulterated bizziness my way. I smell a myst'ry; an' myst'ry an' sich are w'ot Onkle Bedrock lives on."

There was not much time to spare, but those who have seen "Ragged Rufe," in his glory know that the genial philosopher was not the man to take note of that in such an emergency.

He raised the head of the fallen man, and as he did so, by the shiver and wince he knew the individual was not insensible, and that he had bruises, if not broken bones.

He had a flask in his pocket, and its contents were in his estimation a sovereign remedy for all the ills flesh is heir to. He applied the bottle to the lips of the young man without hesitation, and was gratified to see its contents perceptibly diminish.

"Neither dead, ner sleepin', an' ef he's off his base a trifle he kin still tell a prime article when he gits it within range. We'll soon git a p'inter."

Sure enough, the eyes opened, and though more than one spasm of pain distorted the pale features there seemed to be every chance

that in a short time the stranger would be able to speak for himself.

"Take it easy, young man. Yer hev found a—"

Bedrock paused. He remembered he was not now the walking philosopher of the Sierras and that just then it behooved him to speak after the manner of the capitalist.

"Yes, yes," was the feeble answer. "You were a friend, indeed. They meant to kill me without a doubt. If you had not come to my aid I would have changed in for sure, and then, what would have become of Florence?"

"Woman in ther case, ez usu'l," muttered Bedrock.

"Yes. Florence Chase; though—how did you know her name?"

"Heard you go over it to yourself, before you got your wits about you," was the prompt answer. It was easier to explain after that fashion than to worry around with the truth; and there would be less danger of exciting the suspicions of the stranger.

"Help me up, then, for I cannot waste a minute. Do you know that the wretches have got her at last? When I heard it I did not lose a minute but started for Frisco at once."

"And what was the meaning of the little circus here?"

"This was part of the gang. They knew what I would do, and were ready for me. And I was so foolish as to accept the wager of battle when they threw it down. I never thought. Tenderly, if you please. There seems to be something wrong. Oh, heavens! If I have to lie here with broken bones I would sooner be dead and buried. Not a friend to help us! What is to become of her?"

"Don't get excited, young man. I will see you through, since I have once put a hand in the case. Where do you want to go to while we repair damages?"

"I am a stranger here, and know no one. Only arrived this morning."

"We'll try the Centennial, then. As good a place as any, and you can rest easy in mind. Anything that money or wits can do will be done."

CHAPTER II.

BEDROCK HIMSELF AGAIN.

UNCLE BEDROCK was somewhat of a surgeon, but though he gave a cursory glance at the injuries of his newly-found friend, he did not trust himself to attend to the case, confining himself to making the stranger comfortable in a good room at the Centennial, of which he had known by repute.

The doctor came and looked the patient over, prodding here, and feeling there, until he had given a pretty thorough examination.

Then, he looked wise and shook his head.

"Not as bad as it might be; but you will not move for a week or two, I am afraid. Give yourself a thorough rest, in mind as well as body, and you will get out all the sooner."

The young man groaned after a more heart-broken fashion than ever.

"Oh, let up on that."

DeLangdon was inclined to be bluff and outspoken as soon as the doctor had taken his departure.

"If you are in trouble just give me the facts of the case and I will try to keep things moving till you get 'round again. I suspect, from what you have let fall, that I can handle things in better shape than you could, anyhow. You made a good fight against three, but I doubt if you have had the experience dealing with such people that the affair may need."

"If I was sure you would—if I was certain you could! But, why should you trouble yourself with the affairs of a man who is a perfect stranger, whose only claim upon you is that you have first saved his life, and afterward attended to his comfort?"

"A good enough question to ask to any one else; but it shows we are strangers indeed. The answer is, I take delight in such things, and have 'gone off on the trail of villainy more times than I have fingers and toes. If you want me, say the word. If you don't I will catch the next train for the East, and fight it out with the conductor

about the continuous train ticket I was wrestling with. I preferred to pay my way, or a pass would have been a simpler matter."

It was the clearest proof of his disinterestedness that DeLangdon could give. He drew out the flaunting document which indicated that he was *en route* for the East, and thus showed that he had already made a little sacrifice for the doubter.

"Say no more. I believe in you, and will accept your help since you really seem anxious to give it. Yet I cannot give you much to go on; the rest must be found out at San Francisco—if it is to be found out at all."

"Trust me for doing that. I expect to have no end of amusement with the villains. Give me the slightest clue to begin with and I think it will not be long before they find they have some one on their trail."

"You shall have that. And never fear but that if you are successful you will be amply recompensed for all your labor and expense. As far as the latter goes, I am in poor condition myself to make broad promises, but sooner or later I will liquidate every possible claim."

"Oh, it is not a matter of money. I have a quarter of a million loose at both ends, and you can judge whether that will not be as much as we will require."

The young man stared. It was really a little suspicious for a stranger to be mentioning such sums. He was not sure he wanted to pursue the confidence.

"I only tell you so that you can understand the mere want of money is not going to interfere with your affairs. Now, drive on. First and foremost, what is your name?"

"What an oversight! I should have told you that the first thing. Lawrence Oldcort."

"Now, go on with your story. What is this which has happened to Miss Chase, and what have you to do with it? Probably I can guess at the outlines, but when a person is about to put up good money, he would just as soon it was on a sure thing."

"I don't blame you a particle. I should speak the same way, and I am just trying to lay it out in shape so that you can the better understand it. I suppose it really makes little difference about myself, and my past, which has nothing in it of interest?"

"You know best what it is you want me to do for you. I must understand the situation. After that I will operate on my own ideas."

"Well, I have a few hundred dollars at my command, which I have saved up as the result of several years' close work, and it seems to me that if nothing happens I am in a fair way to a moderate fortune in course of time. I have no relatives in the West, and no enemies, so far as I know, on my own account. As you have probably guessed, I love Florence Chase. At present I am working for her interests, and that is the key to the attack on me which you witnessed."

"That is sufficient about yourself, as a starter. Now give me what I must know about this young lady. I suppose there must be some money, somewhere."

"A million, perhaps more. She has been a poor girl, supporting herself by the needle, and taking care of an invalid mother for years, though at one time they were in better, if not in affluent circumstances. By chance they have lately discovered that in all probability they are entitled to this fortune I speak of, and it was in search of evidence in behalf of their claim that I left the city."

"Any success?"

"Yes, more than I had dared to hope for—even though I did discover there were other heirs who might come, under a will, into a share of the property."

"The name of said party?"

"Taylor. He, or they, rather—since there are a brother and sister—can be found in the mining-camps of Southern Arizona and would perhaps help to make the fight if called on."

"Pony Taylor, for a thousand! I have observed that when I once run against a man in the line of business he is not apt to

drop out for a good while afterwards. And his sister, Helen. Yes, if you had them on your side you would have a pair of pards to tie to. I know them like a book."

"Indeed? and you know them? That is good! Their share will be worth looking after, if they can come in with us."

"And the property: Is it a mine, or a hidden pocket, or a *cache*, or anything of that kind?"

"Not at all. It is largely in property in the city—real estate, railroad stock, and I admit, some mining stock."

"And now we are coming to the nub of the affair. Who has them?"

"That will have to be found out, though I have traced the property largely into the hands of two persons. One of them a man above reproach, though many times a millionaire. His name is Lewis Stafford."

"The other is a man of different character, and one who is not spoken of as being among the wealthy men of the city, though he has really a fortune that is by no means small. His name is Grigson, and he is a questionable character at best. He is hand in glove with the disreputable classes, and has holdings in that quarter of the city known as the Barbary Coast."

"Stafford I have heard of, but the other fellow and I have never come together, though the chances are I will dawn in on him if you have any reason of suspecting him of having had anything to do with the funny work at the depot."

"I certainly have—great reason."

"No use to go further with that, at present. Guess I can find it all out better for myself when I get on the ground. And now for the young lady in the case! You say she has been abducted?"

"So I believe from what her mother wired me. She is missing, and I know of no other way to account for the fact."

"Reckon you are right. That is the outline. Now then I want some inside facts, that perhaps you wouldn't think of, and the best way to bring them out is for me to ask questions. If you want me to do you or the young lady any good you must answer them freely."

"Never fear. Having made a confidant of you so far, I shall not draw back. It is the only thing I see to do for poor Florence, and your support is all that has kept me from going wild over her fate. I am ready."

Whether as Bedrock or as DeLangdon there was a shrewdness about the elder man that would have been a credit to a Philadelphia lawyer.

Carefully he questioned in regard to such points as he desired information on, well knowing Oldcort was in better trim to answer them now than he would be later on. While he did not anticipate any serious result from the inquiries, his head would not be apt to be so clear; or his body be as strong, after the excitement which was now sustaining him had died away.

And, as Bedrock always struck while the iron was hot, he had no notion of lingering there longer than was necessary to post himself on the case he had so characteristically undertaken.

When he went out of the Centennial a few hours later he had provided everything he could think of for the young man's comfort, down to a hired nurse, and an order for unlimited credit.

Then, he turned toward the ferry, a modern knight-errant, in search of the forlorn damsel.

CHAPTER III.

A MODERN MERCURY.

DELANGDON had the address of Mrs. Chase in his pocket, and intended to interview her as soon as possible.

After that he expected to lose no time in getting on the trail. Of course, it was barely possible Florence had reappeared; but that was doubtful, if the villains really "meant business."

He found the building in which Mrs. Chase had her rooms; but here he met with a check in the very outset, for the lady was not in, and no one seemed to know when she had gone out, or when she was likely to return.

The nearest approach to information he received was from a pale little woman, a seamstress, who said that Mrs. Chase's daughter had gone on a visit a few days before, and it was as likely as not the mother had joined her.

The secret of Florence's disappearance had been well kept, at all events.

The next thing to do was to locate Grigson, which was done by the aid of a Directory.

DeLangdon knew something about the city, and had no intention of calling upon the man in his present garb, but went on an exploring tour in the direction indicated, and so happened on a bit of corroborative testimony that helped to show he was on the right track.

A man passed him who had on his features some of Bedrock's handiwork so plainly stamped there it was no trouble to recognize him.

It was one of the party he had handled so roughly over at Oakland, and it struck Bedrock at once that the fellow was on his way to confer with his employer.

"I'd like to follow him," thought DeLangdon, at the same time looking down at himself; "but this is not exactly the rig I want to make my appearance in when I go down on the Coast, and the less that party sees of me until I am all dressed up the better. Wonder if he recognized me?"

Whether the fellow had done so or not he gave no sign, and Bedrock turned again, and strolled away. He had in view the hotel at which he had stopped upon his return from the mining-camps, and a certain sachel he had left in the baggage-room to be taken care of.

"If there is anything in this world it pays to be, it is to be economical. I might spend lots of time, and heaps of money, to say nothing of the breath wasted in answering questions, before I could find an outfit equal to the old one. I think, by the time the shades of night begin to gather, the Evening Blossom will begin to expand—Primrose will be himself again!"

The sachel proved to be where he had left it, and was taken to his old room without a particle of hesitation or suspicion, where the exchange was made. As the darkness gathered, a disreputable looking figure stole quietly away from the house, and Horace DeLangdon had disappeared as completely as though he had jumped overboard from the Oakland ferry-boat!

In his place was the great and only original Bedrock!

"Sing'lar how some men kin keep on a-strugglin' fur filthy lucre, a-yeardin' fur broadcloth, an' jest a-dyin' ter git inter ther upper ten—ther sacrid four hundred! Ef they on'y knowed thet ree'l, jinywine happiness kin flourish ez big ez a bay tree onder all ther rags this side er ther 'Gypshun pyramids, w'ot heaps ov s'oodinsides, w'ot gangs ov coin-mad loonyticks, would be saved ter ther world."

"After three long weeks ov 'spectibility it's onspeakable bliss ter be wunst more fat, raggid an' sassy. Lawrence Oldcort, I'm yer frien, tell death, fur ther sake ov ther good yer hev done me."

The city was not his natural stamping-ground; but, emancipated from the restraints of good clothes and high-toned friends, Bedrock was at once at home, whatever might be his surroundings. He swaggered off down the street with all the airs to be imagined until suddenly an idea struck him that caused him to clap his hand to his pocket, and then suddenly halt, with a ludicrous look of disgust on his face.

"'Pon me soul I hev done it. Left all me coin in the other clothes. An' me jest goin' inter a campaign whar duckats may tell. It won't do ter try ter git back fur 'em, an'—reckon I'll hev ter strike Lewis fur a thousand. An' won't he open his dear ole eyes when he sees ther great 'rig'nal afore him?"

He chuckled to himself over the solution of the difficulty, and turned his steps toward the residence of the millionaire without the least hesitation.

He knew Stafford had an engagement at home for the early part of the evening, and did not care to obtrude too soon.

Nevertheless, he reached the neighborhood of the house some little time in advance of the hour he had fixed upon, and strolled on

by with nothing more than the ordinary, curious glance of a gentleman of leisure, who would be glad to interview the cook if he was sure he would not be forthwith handed over to the police.

Almost at the same moment a small girl made her appearance, around the corner, and advanced toward the area door.

She was poorly clad and did not appear to be altogether certain as to her destination. She looked up at the house sharply, and then around at the neighboring buildings.

Bedrock's eye was on her at once.

The hesitation attracted his attention, and instinct told him what was its meaning.

He slackened his pace to a still slower walk, and watched her movements.

Apparently she was satisfied that this was the house she was looking for, and hurried toward the door.

Then, her steps began to lag, and finally she sheered off, in a way that seemed to mean she had no intention of entering the place at all. She skurried away to what might seem a safe distance, and halting, looked up at the upper part of the house, throwing back from her face the shawl which had been so closely wrapped around her head as to conceal her features.

"Ah, leetle one, I think you are my meat, though it are a shame ter go skeerin' sich a cheyilde. Le'mme see w'ot's ther meanin' of this. Ef ett ain't a clue I'll never borry another quarter."

So interested was the girl in watching the house which appeared to have such a peculiar attraction that she never heard the light step of the man of rags, nor did she note his presence until his hand suddenly dropped upon her shoulder.

At the touch she gave a slight scream, and tried to wrench herself away.

Bedrock's fingers lay but lightly on her arm, but she might as well have tried to break away from a grip of steel.

"W'ot is it, leetle one? Are ther a chaine ter 'arn a honist penny? Ef so, give pore ole Bedrock a chaine. Honist Injun, I ain't ate so long I'm a-suff'rin', an' even a bit ov cracker an' a pony beer would be wu'th reekin' one's life fur. Say! You ain't got nothin' wu'th robbin' yer ov on yer p'usson?"

"Let me go, there! Let me go! Honor bright, I ain't got nothin' but this hyer nickel, an' I'll give yer that if you'll hand this letter in at the area door. I was a-goin' to do it, but I'm afeared."

"Afeared ov w'ot, sissy? Nobody's goin' ter hurt yer. Give it hyer. I'll put it thar fur you."

"If you only would. They're strangers to me, an' mebbe they wouldn't want ter let me go ag'in."

Bedrock held out his hand. He understood the situation better than a man who had dealt less frequently with the class to which the child belonged, and knew that she would intrust her commission to him at all hazards.

"That's right, sissy," he continued, as she placed in his fingers something he knew at once was a letter.

"An' now, ther nickel."

She was a little slow about that, but he was after the coin, and got it.

"Good leetle gal! I won't throw off on yer. W'ot's yer name?"

"Why, ain't you bin sayin' it, over an' over? Cissy Bartlett—an' I reckon I bin sayin' too much. I'll just watch an' see if you hand that in. If you don't I'll yell fur the p'lease."

His fingers had unloosened from her arm, and she dodged away as she spoke.

"Cissy Bartlett, eh? Kinder s'prisin', but I knowed yer dad, an' I reckon, yer marm. Run 'long, now. I'll do ther squar' thing by the'r kid, an' say nothin' 'bout it ter nobody."

The name was really a surprise to him, and perhaps his statement was not altogether correct, but he fancied the child had told him the truth and by so doing had given him a surer means of finding her again than she knew of. Without any hesitation on his part he turned back and approached the door.

Of course he knew there was something strange about the matter, and intended to see the inside of the note, but he did not mean Cissy should know. He was already unfold-

ing the paper when he heard her at his shoulder.

"And say, Mister Man, I forgot to tell you. You must say it is for Miss Alty."

She hopped away again so briskly that though he turned at the sound she was already beyond his reach.

He said nothing, but went on down the steps and rung at the area bell.

Almost immediately there was an answer, but in the short space given he had mastered the contents of the epistle, and found there was something afoot that might have some connection with the case he had already on hand.

"Fur Miss Alty," he said, thrusting the folded paper forward into the hand of the astonished domestic.

Before there could be any reply he had backed away from the door, and was mounting the steps.

When he regained the pave he looked around for Cissy Bartlett, but that untrustworthy messenger had disappeared.

CHAPTER IV.

STAFFORD GETS A SURPRISE AND A WARNING.

At the very time Bedrock was handing in the epistle at the area door he was the subject of conversation between two gentlemen who were seated in the room above him, and so near to the window they might have caught a glimpse of his figure slouching down the street if they had been glancing out.

The speakers were Lewis Stafford and a gentleman by the name of Edwards, who was almost as great a light in the financial world as his host.

"And so, you see, I owed the fellow about a million," Stafford was saying.

"After I had paid him the hundred thousand promised I held on long enough to let him get his hand—and it is a big one and a heavy that he carries—into the pie."

"And he had the wit and wisdom to take advantage of the occasion."

"As well as the old operator on change could have done. A month ago he was the hardest-looking tramp that trudged the roadside. To day he is worth a quarter of a million. He might have doubled that again, but, he said it was enough for present needs, and when he wanted more he could hit them again."

"Modest, truly."

"Oh, very. And when he put on his broadcloth he sunk the road, and I wasn't ashamed to escort him down to the boat this morning, and see him started for the bosom of the family he has back East. That is the whole story."

"So fine feathers do some times make fine birds. Will his family correspond?"

"They will, to a charm. I have seen both his wife and daughter. The former is a handsome, well-preserved, aristocratic lady, who knows little in regard to her husband, who has furnished her several fortunes, and disappeared after handing over each one. His daughter is more to my taste, and is very happily married to a man who understands the idiosyncrasies of his father-in-law, and appreciates him for what he is worth."

"An odd fish he must be; and I have my doubts whether he will be contented to live as a man with a quarter of a million ought to live. He will take one look around, and then hark back to his old stamping ground, or I am no judge of human nature."

"I think not. He is a walking philosopher, who has about exhausted the capabilities of one side of life, and will go in for an experience of the other. The Upper Ten of New York will surely furnish him occupation for the remainder of his life."

"Yes, if he once gets fairly started. But I doubt if he makes the effort. Imagine Uncle Bedrock among the Four Hundred—Ragged Rufe as a king-pin among the Knickerbockers!"

"He will get there, all the same—what is it, John?"

There was an interruption to the conversation. A young man, who occupied the position of assistant secretary, but whose actual functions were rather those of a door-keeper and a guard, came gliding into the room.

"If you please, sir, there is—er—er—a

gentleman, or, er—a person, who wishes to speak to you."

"I judge he is not very presentable. Did he mention his business?"

"Well—er—not exactly. A private interview was what he asked for. Said he was a friend of yours, and a sort of a friend of an individual he called Ready Rank; and that circumstances totally unexpected and suddenly arising, compelled him to trespass on your time. He is a tramp all over, but there is something about the man that made me think I had better see you before I fired him out."

Stafford turned to his friend before he spoke, a look of amazement on his face.

"Of all things, Edwards! What do you think of that?"

Mr. Edwards broke into a laugh.

"It beats the record, to be sure. Have him in, and let him speak for himself. I can retire till the conversation is over."

John looked on, about as much astonished as the others. Stafford no doubt guessed who the tramp was, and intended to see him.

"Yes, John, bring him in; and if I give you the nod, retire in good order. He is a gentleman who generally keeps his affairs very private."

John hustled out, and in a few moments had ushered in the gentleman in waiting. The secretary was a man of muscle himself, and had no objections to a turn-up with a tough customer in the line of his business, but he seemed to have no particular fancy for a close acquaintance with this one.

"Yer 'umble, bumble, over constumblservant," the tramp said, with a scrape of his foot, and a wave of the battered hat he held in his hand.

Mr. Edwards looked curiously at the man, trying to trace a resemblance to the prosperous looking individual he had seen in the company of the railroad king, not so many hours ago.

If it had not been for the story Stafford had just been telling he certainly would not have noticed the resemblance; and even now had his doubts whether this could be the same person.

The absence of the broadcloth, and the presence of the rags, made quite a difference in the apparent size and figure of the visitor; and Edwards could have sworn, had he thought them different people, that the tramp was a couple inches shorter in height, and a dozen more in girth.

There was a smile on the battered face—a smile over which his bibulous-looking nose blazed ruddily—and though his eyes had a far-away look as they glanced in his direction, there was a suggestion of sternness in them which hardly agreed with the rest of his looks.

"Good-day, sir!" said Stafford, without the least appearance of recognizing the visitor.

"I understand you desired a private interview. If your business is of such a nature as to require it, my friend will leave the room—though I can assure you he is discretion itself, and any statement made in his presence will be as confidentially regarded as though made before me alone."

"Kayrect you be! Ef Jimmy Edwards gives his word, ef it's on'y to a tramp like me, ett's ez good ez a gilt-edge bond on ther S. B. O. an' K. May'z well drap that line, an' git right down ter bizzness. I come in ter git a check cashed. I war took short ov a sudden, an' I ain't prezackly ther kind ov a lookin' cherub ter lay down a bit ov paper at ther Hide an' Lumber an' ax fur a thousand on it. They mou't ax fur 'denterfication; an' I du'nno ez Lew Stafford'd keer ter be called on by sich a friend."

"Any time, and all the time, if there is any real necessity for it; but I confess I would prefer arranging it after the manner you suggest. I suppose there is a thousand in the home safe, and if it is only for a temporary loan I don't think it worth while to bother about the check."

"But that wouldn't be bizzness; an' ole Bedrock are one ov the profits ov thet same thing. Hyer's yer check, an' ef it's not askin' too much ther sooner yer gits it cashed ther better. I'm on a dark trail, an' ef I should foller it over ther range ther bank might stop payment tell ther zekyters war heard frum."

It did not take Stafford long to find the thousand. Then, he said sternly:

"It strikes me you have made a sudden change in your intentions, and one that is not at all wise. I know there is no relying on you; but I must say I thought I saw you started for the bosom of your wife and family. What is the meaning of it all, anyway?"

"Fraud, villainy, bloody murder prehaps. I war that sot on goin' East I couldn't rest, when 'long comes this hyer chaine fur fun, an' the k'reckshun ov evil manners, an' I jest camped right on ther trail. It's goin' ter be a big thing, even fur Bedrock, an' he kin 'ford ter spend a thousand ter see ther endin'. Wife an' fambly kin keep, meantime. Reck-on they ain't yearnin' bad ter see him, no-how."

"Not if you come in this sort of shape," answered Stafford, dryly.

"There is one thing you must not forget. You are not in the wilds of Paddy's Flat, and if you carry on your amateur work with the looseness you have accumulated in the hills you will be apt to come to grief. Go slow; and above all things, don't get to killing. There is a prejudice against such things here."

"Don't I know it? Ain't that w'ot I bin a-sayin', over an' over ag'in ter meself ez I come along. 'Go slow, Bedrock. You das-sen't hustle things ez you uster did. But you must git thar, all ther same.' An' you bet I will. Thar's millyuns in it."

"Take care you don't throw away your own good money, though. Millions are not easily made, in spite of the atmosphere you have been lately living in. Say, old man, drop this notion; get back to your broad-cloth, and I'll give you a pointer on a new deal, in which I can guarantee there will be money. You know I am your solid friend, and would not counsel you for anything but your own good. I don't want to see you broke before you have fairly started to travel the new road."

"Thankee, Lewis! Double twice over, thankee. I dunno a man I'd sooner ax ter loan me a quarter; but you're off on ther scheme. Them millyun ain't fur me. Ther other feller's goin' ter git 'em, an' I reckon I'll be a thousand out w'ichever way ther cat jumps."

"It appears to me, then, that the sooner we have a committee appointed to look after your welfare—financially as well as physically—the better it will be. I am inclined to think you are stark, staring crazy."

"Easy does it, boss. Le'mme whisper a word in yer picterful year."

He gave a sly, almost imperceptible glance in the direction of Edwards, who was taking in the conversation with as much amusement as interest, and then leaned over the table.

"Thar's a lovely wooman in ther case. Young ernuf ter be me gran'darter, but lovely all ther same. I'm her champion tell her young man comes on ther carpet, an' arter that I surmise ter perfect 'em both tell we hev got ter ther safe eend ov ther trail. An' now, jest one word ov warnin'. Kin yer keep it ter yerself?"

"Certainly, if that is the wisest course," responded Stafford, somewhat puzzled by the impressive manner of the tramp; "but, if my connection with you is likely to bring me into difficulty it seems to me it would be the proper thing for you to amend the error of your ways."

"Wrong ag'in. It's in danger of your life that you are; but, old Bedrock is around! Look arter yer own safety ez well ez you know how; take mighty good keer ov Miss Alty, an' trust ter Ragged Rufe. He'll do ther rest. Orrevore! an' w'en I see yer ag'in I'll tell yer ther rest ov ther story."

"But—wait a moment! I have no doubt your caution is worth the heeding, but it is too indefinite to do me any good. What is the nature of the danger?"

"Nod's ez good ez a wink, boss; sorry ter say I can't go ary furdur. So long! I'll see yer later—ef I don't croak."

With a sweeping nod, that was meant for both of the gentlemen, Bedrock slouched out of the room.

CHAPTER V.

STAFFORD LOOKS SERIOUS.

"WHAT nonsense has he got in his head now?" asked Edwards, more than half inclined to laugh at the rather dramatic exit.

"No nonsense at all," responded Stafford, gravely. "I am afraid there is only too much truth in his warning words. At all events, I shall take extra precautions until I hear from him again."

"And you think this is not a simple freak—an effort to have fun at your expense, and another spell of the life in the gutter, which seems to be his only idea of enjoyment?"

"Not a bit of it. What he calls fun is a totally different thing. It is danger, desperation, death perhaps. It is a life such as you and I would not lead for twice the wealth we have accumulated. I got a taste of it at Paddy's Flat, and it will serve me for the natural term of my life."

"Pity, then, he could not be more explicit. If he has really unearthed a plot of any magnitude the attention of the police should have been called to it at once."

"That would be exactly what he would not desire to do. With the exception of a private detective or two with whom he has had more or less dealings, he has a sovereign contempt for the whole tribe—and I don't know but what he has some reason for his opinions. If he had only indicated from what direction I might expect the danger to come I would be better satisfied."

"Probably he did not know himself; and I would not take his warning too seriously, though caution is all very well. I suppose it will make no difference as to the matter we have in hand?"

"Certainly not."

As he spoke he pressed the button of the bell with which he usually summoned his assistant secretary.

There was no answer, however, and after waiting for a moment he rung again.

"I hardly dismissed him for the evening. I certainly did not mean to, for I had intended to send him to the office to see McKenzie. I hope he has not gone. A valuable man is John—and so he ought to be to earn his salary."

John did not come, however, and Mr. Edwards suggested that he had hardly left the house, since he remembered distinctly Stafford telling him he would require his services as messenger some time during the evening.

"Stranger, then, he does not answer."

Perhaps the warning of Bedrock had made him suspicious. Under other circumstances he would hardly have troubled himself about the matter. He would either have called in some one else to look for the man, or waited until his visitor was gone before making personal investigations.

Instead, he excused himself with a hasty word, and passed out of the room.

There were several rooms the railroad magnate claimed for his own exclusive and private use, and save when some of the domestics were cautiously setting things to rights they were left alone in their glory by every one else.

Between books and papers, and the careless occupancy of a man who had little thought for anything but the practical details of business, they were in a fine state of neglect when Stafford stopped for a moment to listen, as what he thought might be a suspicious sound came to his ear.

The sounds developed grandly.

There was a gurgling and a groaning, and finally a pounding of feet, as by one who desired to attract attention, and despaired of doing it in any other way.

After the warning he had just received Lewis Stafford was inclined to be cautious, and he listened to see if he could get any explanation of what was the trouble without going further into the line of danger.

"There can hardly be any nonsense about that," was his thought. "It is the effort of a man who is in trouble, so I'll take a look in that direction."

Certain experiences which the millionaire had while he was visiting one of the rough and ready camps on the frontier had made him prompt with his weapons, and at the first sound that appeared suspicious his pistol had come out, ready for instant use.

Holding this well up he advanced into the other room.

To his surprise he found that the person who had been trying so hard to raise an alarm was none other than the missing secretary, John Esmer.

And he was in a plight which was as

uncomfortable as it was ridiculous, so that it was no wonder that he wanted to attract attention.

Some one had gagged him most artistically, though it was done with a napkin.

He had been tied to an arm-chair, by cords around wrists, knees, and ankles, and the chair tilted over on its back, so that there he lay. If he had not managed to loosen his feet sufficiently to reach the floor with them, the chances were he would have remained there all night.

"Good heavens, John! what is the meaning of this?" exclaimed Stafford as he set the chair up again, and pulled the gag from the mouth of the secretary.

"The tramp!" gasped John, working his jaws as though he was not sure they could do their duty. "He caught me unawares, and triced me up there before I had a chance to defend myself. What else he was doing is more than I can say, but I heard him rum-maging around, and I wouldn't wonder if he was on the inside of your safe."

"Sure it was the tramp, John? You may have had him on the brain so badly you could think of nothing else. He is not the kind of a man to do such a thing, hard as he looked."

"Dead sure. I had a fair view of his face more than once, and he did not seem to care whether I did, either. It's my opinion he just came in for a chance to rob you; and I don't see how you let him get away from you. I was listening for the bell, expecting you to call me to show him out. I was sitting right in this chair, and first thing I knew he had me fixed."

"He did indeed, John. Better sit still till you get your wits all back and I will look around and take stock of damages. I doubt if we will find any great harm done, beyond the wrench to your feelings."

"You think, then—?"

"That it was a joke; but we will soon see."

There were no evidences of a struggle, nothing was displaced, so far as the railroad magnate could see in a glance around the room, and he moved across to the safe at which John had pointed.

It was locked, as he expected to find it, and no one but himself knew the combination.

"Hardly worth while to open it," he thought.

"I remember turning the knob when I left it. At the same time, I suppose I ought to make some sort of an examination. No doubt John put on airs with Primrose when he came in, and the old man took this plan of getting even—and perhaps to show me what one man might do to me."

While thinking, Mr. Stafford was turning the button, to this side and that, and finally the door swung open.

Hastily he glanced over the interior, pulling out one drawer after another, until the last one was opened.

Then, he gave a start, looked again, raised some papers which lay there, and then closed the door and locked it without a word, though there was for an instant a puzzled, and perhaps a worried look upon his face.

"Is it all right?" anxiously inquired the secretary.

His little adventure had weakened the latter for the time being, but now he had recovered his strength, and was sitting bolt upright awaiting for an answer with an eagerness which Stafford noticed though he made no sign.

"It appears to be, John, it appears to be. As I never have any money in that safe, and the papers are mostly duplicates, it is not very likely any great harm would be done if the thing had been ransacked. I will give it another look in the morning. Meantime, say nothing of the affair. It would do you no good if it were to get into the papers, and would make no end of worry for me. The reporters from all creation would be here for an interview, and nothing I could say would convince them there was nothing in it."

"Very well, sir. Of course I shall do as you say, though I don't see how you can take it so coolly. I should think you would want him under lock and key till you were certain he had not walked off with something that did not belong to him. I hope you will

pardon me for not sending him about his business in the first place."

"That is all right, that is all right! You did the correct thing, and I have no fault to find with you. I want you to go over to see McKenzie, and I should say it was fortunate for you that I needed you. Otherwise, no one would have been in here before morning."

Having explained the business which he wished attended to, and dispatched the man on his errand, Stafford returned to the room where he had left Edwards.

"A useful man," he remarked, as he entered the room. "and yet in some things not altogether reliable. I found him, however. Now, in regard to the matter of which we were speaking."

Without alluding to what had happened the railroad king led the conversation back to the business they had on hand, and in a brief period the tramp and the serving-man were alike forgotten.

While they were deep in their conversation the door opened and a young lady glided into the room.

Mr. Edwards immediately rose, and welcomed her after the manner of an elderly friend, but Stafford looked vexed—at himself.

"I declare, Alta, you must pardon me. I had forgotten our engagement; and I suppose it is now too late. Call on me for any sort of a peace-offering, from a diamond to a shoe-buttoner and I will answer without delay. It's not often I have to make my excuses, but when I met Edwards I naturally talked myself into a lethargy. It must have been too provoking."

"Don't trouble yourself about it. You know I am always satisfied to let business take precedence of pleasure. And, to tell the truth, I was not sure I wanted to go. I have had a warning."

She spoke lightly, and yet, no doubt, there was an earnestness behind it which she did not suspect. Stafford started.

"A warning?"

"Yes. I did not intend to speak about it, but there is no use to have secrets from you. Read that."

"That" was a note written in a vile hand, on a scrap of paper which had been torn off of a letter long carried in a dirty pocket.

From the appearance of things the author evidently used tobacco, and there were yellow shadings to some of the letters, which indicated that between heats he had sucked his pencil vigorously in search of inspiration.

This was what Lewis Stafford read.

"DEER MISS:—

"These few lines is to warn you a plot is on foot wich thee same are foul ov danger. Don't you go to thee theayter to-night if you do sumthing may happen. Tomorrer I may be tellin you more. Jest now I am afeered too speak butt ef you tell honor brite all things is confidenshall I will open up too bedrock in my next. No more.

"A FRIEND."

"The infernal villain!" exclaimed Stafford, as he looked the thing over and tried to read between the lines.

"Of course the upshot is intended to be something in the nature of blackmail," suggested Alta.

"Certainly; and no doubt the scheme is well laid. The safest way to defeat it is to pay no attention to this, or any subsequent communications. Should he dare write you again let me know. Perhaps I can have the villain trapped."

But all the time Stafford was speaking he was thinking of the warning of Bedrock!

This was no doubt the first move in the game; but, what was the scheme?

Pity it was Primrose had been so indefinite.

CHAPTER VI.

MOLL BARTLETT AND THE CROSS-EYED MAN.

JAPHET GRIGSON looked like a snake.

It is hard to explain why, because physically he was neither sleek nor slimy, and his steps were slow and tottery. Probably it was because of his bright, beady eyes, and a certain peculiar conformation of the head, which was broad and flat.

If the jaws had been more massive he might have been likened to a bulldog, but as it was, no one thought of calling him anything but a snake.

Speaking after the manner of men, a snake he was.

He owned a saloon down on the Barbary Coast, which was frequented by the usual assortment of vile characters to be found there and in such places, but the business was for the most part under the charge of "Jimmy, the Fly," and Japhet was seldom seen behind the bar unless he was unexpected.

The place did a good business, though in a quiet sort of way. There was a regular run of custom, and strangers seldom intruded. People who "went slumming" through those delectable regions generally took in the Colorado, Arizona or Scandinavian balls, as presenting a better picture of the life they were supposed to abhor; and things at Grigson's were so quietly managed that the police seldom had call to interfere.

Occasionally a stranger to the place wandered in.

He was in no great danger of his life as long as he behaved himself, and if he was not too respectable he might even go out again with his cash account all correct. If he was suspected of being better than he looked it was possible he would be hustled in the push around the tables, or given the heel on the stairway when attempting to go out, but these cases were sporadic, and never found their way into the morning papers.

On the night in question, something over an hour after Lewis Stafford had perused the warning received by Alta, one of these stragglers came tumbling down the steps which led to the den.

He was evidently a little past middle age, and a life of vagabondage and dissipation had seemingly told upon him.

There was an evil glint in his eye as he surveyed the scene from the door, and as he slouched across the room to a vacant table his swagger proclaimed he felt at home in the midst of his surroundings.

Dropping into a chair he rapped on the table sharply with a dollar he was holding in his pudgy fingers, at the same time giving a whistle which attracted the attention of a waitress.

"Coming!" said the "young lady," with a nod of the head, in answer to his salutation.

"So are Christmas, Molly, but yer needn't be in quite ez much ov a hurry. Ett's on'y a schooner ov beer, an' I ain't ther kind ez pays fur it twice over, er fails ter git ther right change back. Ett's purty nigh ter a thankee job, fur an ole frien', an' so, or'nary 'tenshun'll be all I'll ax."

"You'll get it, old man, but I can't say I remember you, and I'll swear you ain't been in here since I came on."

"That's all right, Molly; but I knowed you an' Hank Bartlett in ther days ov old. Yer a-wearin' well, an' life ain't gone so ding-blasted tough with me, considerin'. Ef you war in horsepittal, an' I in Potter's Field ter stay, ett wouldn't be no great wonder. Run 'long now, an' we'll talk ov w'ot bez bin some other time. I've come ter stay, an' this hyer are ez good a stampin' ground ez any."

The woman went off muttering. Once she cast a glance back at him over her shoulder.

There were plenty of men who knew all about her present life, but this one seemed to remember something about her past. Who could he be?

"Et's a fack, Moll. Ye'r no chicken, an' I ain't prezactly a this year's goslin'. I'm flush ter-night er I'd ax ye ter loan me a quarter on ther stren'th ov hevin' oncte salivated a man w'ot they called ther Red Duke. You remember me now?"

An instant gleam of recognition did shoot across the face of the woman, who caught the tramp fiercely by the shoulder.

"Hush, hush! Not so loud. I remember you now, though you have changed for the worse even more than I have done."

"No style, Molly. I reckon I hev changed some'at, but yer does yerself on-jestice. Jest ez young an' fair you be ez ther-night I lined him with ther post at ther head ov ther bar, and drapped him when he held a full hand."

"Say no more about it now. They don't

know of my past here and I don't intend they shall. And I dare not stand here and talk. That is not drawing in the duckats for the place. But I'd like to see you again, where we could talk. You were the only man at the Bar. If all the rest of the world had as much sand and sense as you then had I might not have gone so far wrong. It don't seem to have saved you, though."

Before the stranger to the place could answer she hurried away, and was soon seen flitting around the tables on the opposite side of the room.

"Nothin' like sowin' seeds ov kindness in yer yewth," muttered the tramp.

"An' ther nex' best thing are ter recommender them. Ef I ain't mistook I got one frien' in the place."

For a little he was silent, slowly sipping at his beer, while his eyes roamed around the room, presently to light upon a face which seemed to be familiar.

"Abednego, ther cross-eyed man, ez I'm a livin' sinner! Are he one of ther instertutes hyer, er hez he jest dropped in, irreglar, like meself? Ett's wu'th wile ter know."

Without seeming to do it he watched the cross-eyed man while he played with his beer. When Molly came that way again he swallowed the remnants at a gulp, and beckoned her toward him.

"Nuther schooner, Moll, an' ef yer don't like ter j'ine me fur ther sake ov old times keep out change 'nuff ter h'iste one on ther sly."

Without a word she filled his order, but when she came back she lingered a moment at his shoulder.

"Say, old man, I got to try a few blandishments your way, because Fly Jimmy is watching, but if you know what is good for your wealth you had better give me a quiet cussin', and send me about my business. This is not the worst dive in Frisco, but they hev an eye to business here, all the same."

"Trust ter Bedrock ter pull ther wool over the eyes ov the fly one. You jest continner ter look charmin', an' I'll be more disreputable ner ever. An', Moll, thar's a galoot over thar ez looks fur all ther world like me ole side pard Trinnfador, him ez warin ther mix with me, an' Gentle Joe, an' Royal George, an' ther rest ov 'em, down at Blazer's Bar, sum years ago. You know him?"

He spoke with a savage shake of the head, but the woman understood, and gave a sly glance at the man indicated before answering.

"That's him, as I know to my sorrow. He has been hunting this place till I'm sick of the sight of him."

"Ez w'y?"

"Sometimes he has money, and sometimes not. And when he has not he is a bad man to bounce, and he generally gets what he wants—though he dips lighter than many would who knew as much as he does."

"Thankee, Moll. Thet's all I wanted ter know. Now run 'long ag'in, but keep yer peepers peeled. I may want more beer, an' ef I do I drink it frum no han's but yer own fair ones."

"Hush that, if you don't want to make me your enemy. What have I to do with such talk from a man who has once been my friend, when a friend I needed?"

"Oh, it's no mash, Moll; I ain't thet kind, 'sides hevin' a wife an' fambly ter lavish all my afflickshuns on. But, I kin feel a frien'ly feelin' swell ez yerself, an' I talk straight frum ther rattles. Now, ef ye don't want a hot one en ther jaw le'mme alone. It ain't fun I'm after, but lush."

The sudden transition was for the benefit of a man whom Bedrock suspected of being one of the heelers of the house.

The woman understood, and with as light a laugh as she could muster exclaimed:

"So long, then, old horse! Perhaps I'll see you later."

"An' now, how kin I tackle Trinny? He's so onreliable in his feelin's thet a ole frien' are sumtimes wuss than no frien' at all; an' fur looks—who kin tell w'ot a cross-eyed man are thinkin' ov? I'll try him a go, aryhow."

It was true enough that it was hard to tell what the cross-eyed man was thinking of.

Bedrock had watched him carefully enough, but had never suspected the compliment was

*See Dime 375, "Royal George."

being returned. When Trinnfador rose from his seat Ragged Rufe was almost sure he had lost him.

"He's off on ther fu'st boat, an' nobody knows whar he'll be goin', er when he'll be back ag'in. No use ter hail him, either. He kin be ez hard ov hearin', an' ez obstinate a cuss jin'rally, ez ever eat a clam. Ah!"

To his surprise Abednego, as Bedrock had named him, was coming straight in his direction, and there was nothing to do but sit still and wait for him.

"Shake, old man!" was the salutation of the cross-eyed man, as he suddenly thrust a paw fully as begrimed as his own in front of Bedrock.

"Glad ter see yer 'live, an' chipper. Ett's bin a long time sence we met. How's ther world wag?"

"Tough. Ef I hedn't struck a man fur a case ter-night reckon I'd 'a' gone dry. An' me duds speak fur themselves."

"Yer wants a job, eh?"

"All pay an' no work—you bet."

"Same old fraud, eh?"

"You bet."

What was the cross eyed man looking at? Bedrock had traveled with him for six months, once, and he didn't know. Following the direction in which he was certain Trinnfador's eyes were *not* pointing, he caught a glimpse of Japhet Grigson, gliding into the room by a door that led away somewhere to the rear.

"Nerves ez good ez ever?" asked Abednego, after a brief interval of silence.

"That's ter tell, but I'm willin' ter gamble on 'em. Git over yander an' I'll shoot a quarter outen yer teeth—that is, ef ye'll len' me one fur the 'cashun."

"Ever hear ov ther Highbinders?"

"Plenty lots."

"Willin' ter buck ag'in' them?"

"Fur rocks."

"Put her thar, then. They're on ther trail ov a wite man, an' ther job's ter keep 'em off."

The two clasped hands, and Bedrock was as good as sworn to a duty of which he only knew the name, and guessed at the danger.

At the same time he caught an almost imperceptible movement of Japhet Grigson's finger, and something told him it was made for their benefit.

CHAPTER VII.

BEDROCK TO THE RESCUE.

"THE boss are a-talkin' to us, guess we better be a-movin'."

Trinnfador had also caught the gesture, and spoke as their hands fell apart.

"Minnit, then. Cain't waste lush. No tellin' when I'll git more."

In haste Bedrock raised his beer, and slowly drained it to the last drop. Then, he turned away from the table and followed the lead of his old-time pard.

Despite the fact that both were large men there was a cat-like movement to their steps which render them inaudible. No one paid any attention to their departure, and they passed out of the door which led to the steps so silently they came upon a slight form lurking there without the least notice.

If the fellow had had his wits about him he might have slipped by without attracting any attention.

Unfortunately for him he shrunk back, in some confusion, and the action was sufficient.

Trinnfador made a quick move forward, and had the man by the neck before he had time to take a single step.

"This hyer are one ov ther infernal Chinks, now. Hyer he goes!"

And wheeling, he tossed him into the room they had just left.

"He'll be purvided fur in thar, and it'll be a mighty good scheme fur us ter con-tinner ter light out. Thar's no need fur him ter know who played catypult ef he comes r'arin' out afore the chaps git holt ov him."

He spoke without noticing Bedrock was no longer at his back. The old fellow had no need to sit at the feet of Abednego to learn wisdom. When Trinnfador seized the Chinaman, Bedrock darted up the stairs.

He had caught sight of another figure above—a Chinaman was craning his neck to

see what was going on below, and he covered Ragged Rufe promptly with a revolver, as the latter came upon the street.

The Mongolian learns to use the revolver with fatal effect, but he seldom shoots unless he has a sure thing. A snap-shot would have been in order, but the Chinaman lingered on his aim, and meantime Bedrock's fist shot out.

As the blow connected after the fashion intended, of course the man went down with a crash, and lay motionless.

"Good ernuff," growled the cross-eyed man, coming up to the level of the pave, and hurrying Bedrock away.

"Don't want ther rat-eaters ter drop to who's give 'em gruel, though I'm a-thinkin' they're onto me a'ready. No use fur 'em ter know you hev a hand in ther game, though, ef they be."

"It looks too blame much like runnin' away ter tickle me, but I'm in your hands s'long ez you play me white. Who was them?"

"Scouts, lookin' out fur th'r game, ef I ain't mistook. They're playin' a bold hand but we'll be too much fur 'em yit."

They had hurried away without stopping to see whether their performance had attracted attention to the spot, and before they had gone many paces Trinnfador turned into a dark-looking alley.

"Say nothin', an' keep clost. Ef ary body turns up a-askin' questions le'mme do ther chinnin'. I know whar I'm a-goin'."

With that warning, to which the other made no reply, Abednego plunged on in the darkness, finally turning sharply to the right, and entering a door which led to a stairway.

Up the stairs they went without hesitation, though there was no light by which to guide their steps. The cross-eyed man was evidently well acquainted with the route.

Halting at last, the latter knocked once or twice in what Bedrock noted was a peculiar way, on a door that opened into the hall they were in.

There was no answer, and when the knocking was repeated, and there was still no response, Trinnfador cautiously tried the lock, and found it yielded to the touch.

The room which they entered was a cozy one, well lighted and furnished, and at first sight void of any occupant.

"Suthin' queer 'bout this," muttered Abednego.

"He orter b'in hyer a-waitin', an'—great Scott! Thar he be."

It was no wonder he expressed his surprise, little demonstrative as he was generally inclined to be.

He had caught sight of a crumpled heap on the floor, half hidden by the table, and though the face looked blue and ghastly, the eyes were wide open, the tongue protruding, yet there was no trouble in recognizing the flat, snake-like head of Japhet Grigson.

Trinnfador darted forward at once, but Bedrock quietly took a survey of things. He did not know beforehand what he was to expect, and perhaps thought this was the natural order of affairs.

There was no great evidence of a struggle having taken place, but there were some papers on the table which looked as though they might have been disarranged, and an overturned chair hinted that Grigson was seated, examining the documents, when he was attacked—whether by a fit or an assassin remained to be learned.

Something else caught the attention of Bedrock, however.

Beyond the fallen man was a door, in the lock of which the key was sticking.

"You look after him, pard, an' I'll see w'ich way ther Highbinder went—fur I reckon it's sum ov ther work. Thar's whisky on ther shelf ef you ain't got a perivate jar ov yer own."

Throwing the suggestion back over his shoulder Bedrock moved past the table, and first having tried the door, turned the key in the lock.

He knew, of course, the murderer—if murder had been done—had not made his escape in this direction; but that seemed to make no difference. He passed on over the threshold, and closed and locked the door behind him.

He stood in utter darkness, and the room had the chill of one devoid of any other

tenant, but for all that he seemed to think there might be some one in hearing distance.

"Florence, oh, Florence!" he called, and then stood silent while he listened.

After a little he thought he heard a sob, and repeated the low-voiced call; but without eliciting any response.

It was no easy matter to locate the direction from whence the single sound proceeded, but when it was repeated he hesitated no longer, advancing with outstretched arms, not knowing what he might run against.

The opposite wall was not more than a few paces distant, and when reached he found a door corresponding to the one through which he had entered; but this time the key was not in the lock.

The key in his hand fitted the lock, however, and he was not balked. A faint light in the room beyond was sufficient for him to see that he had found some one at last.

The room was not more than a dozen feet in length or width, and in the further corner, closely hugging the padded wall, crouched a girl, who looked up at Bedrock in terror as he slouched into view.

"Don't be skeered, leetle one, I'm comin' ez yer solid friend. Ef yer need help say ther word an' you kin have it in ary shape yer want it—money, mind er muskle, an' I kinder s'pishun thet you are the Florence Chase, which I peromised I'd keep a look out fur. Ef so I s'pect you'll want ter leave in ther fu'st boat."

It was Bedrock, the tramp, who spoke, but it was in his softest tones, and his words were more than reassuring.

The girl sprung to her feet with clasped hands.

"Yes, I am Florence Chase, and oh, if you can help me, and will, I will be so grateful! Quick! take me away from this horrid place, and these horrid people!"

"I dunno ez I kin do that 'thout goin' back on a pard, w'ich ther same hez ter be treated w'ite; but I kin turn yer loose, lend yer change fur cab fare an' tell yer w'ich way ter go. Ett's takin' sum resk, I'll allow, but ef yer head are level you orter git thar. But you'll hev ter git a move on. Thar's no time fur foolin' er tears."

"Oh, I am ready now," exclaimed the girl, darting to a lounge, and catching up a hat and shawl which lay there.

"I cannot get from this den too quickly."

"This way, then."

It might not be altogether safe to attempt to lead her back through the room in which he had left Trinnfador and the prostrate Grigson, but Bedrock knew no other way, and would have attempted it had he not made a discovery.

In the intermediate room was a second doorway, and through this they gained access to the hall.

Without the loss of a minute he hurried the girl down the stairway, through the dark alley, and out upon the street, giving her a few rapid directions as they went.

"I'll watch yer fur ez ther corner, an' after that you an' luck fur it."

Without awaiting to return thanks, even, the girl sped away, and as the coast happened to be clear Bedrock saw the corner passed in safety.

Then he turned back and entered the room again where they had found Japhet Grigson, by the same door he and the cross-eyed man had used.

"Reckon, pard, yer knows I b'in hyer all ther time. W'ot's ther verdick?"

"He ain't dead, but it's a tol'able clost shave. He's wigglin' now, an' kin swear in less ner a hour by a good deal."

At that moment Japhet opened his eyes; and they rested full upon Bedrock.

The veteran stood the gaze without wincing, though there was a deadliness about it which might have made a less thoroughly seasoned man quail. It seemed to say, beware! When strength comes back the snake will strike.

"Le'mme talk to him, pard," said Trinnfador, pushing Primrose to one side.

"They say he's a handy cove with ther gun, an' he might send you one frum his pocket afore he got onto his base. I see he's a-reachin' fur it now."

The restoratives the cross-eyed man had been applying had done their work effectually, and the half-strangled man was rapidly regaining strength and wits.

"Who is this?" was the first thing he gasped.

"Wun ov ole Time's rocks, an' a side pard ov mine ez I kin vouch fur. Inther contrack yer wants me ter kerry I wants him ter hole up one eend. Ef yer wants ter know more about him ax him yerself. Ett's a mighty lucky thing fur you ez I met him. Leastwise, ef yer are in no hurry 'bout goin' up ther flume."

"Why?"

"'Cause I wouldn't b'in 'round ther time when yer give me ther wink; an' ef I hed I'd a' knowed better ner ter hev bu'sted ther door when I didn't git no answer ter ther signal, twicte over. We bin a-workin' with yer half a hour by ther clock. Ef it ain't bein' too fresh fur a outsider, w'ot's ther matter?"

"You hardly need ask that question. An infernal strangler was here and attacked me when I came in. I had no chance, and I guess he thought he had done for me. What else he has been after I can't say till I am done looking. Help me up. I must know at once."

He seemed to have forgotton Bedrock already, and rose limply, clinging to the arm of Abednego for support.

A hasty glance around, showed the disarranged papers on the table; but only for an instant did his eyes rest on them. Then he advanced to the door through which Bedrock had passed out on his exploring tour.

A curse left his lips when he found the door locked and the key missing.

Not that the turning of the lock gave him any trouble, since he drew a duplicate key from his pocket; but it was a hint of what had happened.

Two open doors to the next room told the rest of the story. It was no real use for him to stagger forward and glare into the third room. The bird had flown.

"By the foul fiend! The other gang has got her. After them quick! Or, no! It is no use. In the time that has elapsed they may be half-way across the city. Better move slowly till we find the trail. Then, we will rush things, and the killing will begin—if we have to slaughter her first of all."

CHAPTER VIII.

AMONG THE DREGS.

So far Bedrock had made a success that was scarcely to be expected, and at the very first attempt had actually unearthed the missing Florence Chase. Had he been able, in his mind, to accompany her, the case would probably have been ended, then and there.

Loyalty to his pard, the cross-eyed man, kept him back, to say nothing of the fact that he wanted to learn something more about Japhet Grigson, and the troubles he seemed to have of his own.

He gave his directions briefly, but clearly, and the girl woman seemed to be sufficiently composed to understand them. If she met with no untoward interruptions he believed she would be able to reach her home without trouble, and he intended to call upon her at an early hour the next morning, and give her such explanations as would be most for her good.

Flushed with hope after her unexpected rescue from the place where she had been for some days confined, Florence had no fears, herself, and darted away on the course laid out for her, fully assured she could remember every turning, and that there could be but little danger ahead now that she was upon the street.

Nor was there, so long as some one from Grigson's did not get upon her trail, or, a fancied resemblance to some of the night birds who fluttered their plumage in that neighborhood cause some one to address her.

A woman alone in that quarter was always supposed to be able to take of herself.

She had gone several squares, and was beginning to slacken her speed, believing she was out of danger, when trouble began.

She was almost opposite a dark alleyway, between two houses, and her first intimation that any one was near was hearing a step. Then, some one called:

"That you, Nance? Bin awaiting an hour. What luck, old girl?"

Florence uttered a little cry of alarm, and again quickened her pace. She thought it likely a mistake had been made, and that if she hurried away the man would be aware of the fact, and trouble her no more. If he was waiting for any one he would not be apt to leave the spot and follow her.

In this she was mistaken.

The fellow, whoever he was, caught a glimpse of her through the means of the street lamp ahead, and followed without hesitation.

When she noted this Florence broke into a wild run; and the heavy boots came clattering after her at a great rate. She was light of foot and might perhaps have succeeded in evading him had it not been that she tripped at the next crossing.

"Ye would, would ye!" hissed the fellow in her ear as he darted up, and snatched at her wrist.

"Fork over, old girl, and be blamed glad I don't baste you. I know the game you were up to—been cooling my heels in that alley this hour or more watching for you. It ought to be a tidy little pile, and no mistake. He's the flashiest looking swell I ever saw you pick up."

"Hands off!" gasped Florence; and in her excitement she could hardly speak above a husky whisper.

"What do you mean? Let me alone or I shall scream."

"A healthy old character you are, to be screaming around here, this time of night. I reckon the cops would run you in without telling; and perhaps your fine gent would have something to say in the morning. Off with your stockings, or do you want me—"

He paused in his speech, looked more closely at the girl, and muttered an oath. He saw she was not the woman for whom he had taken her, and that she was almost speechless from fright.

"Who in thunder are you? Did Nance send you out here with her hat and shawl on, to lead me off the track while she slipped clear with the boodle? Own up, now. If she did I'll murder you both if you don't let me on to her lay."

"I do not know what you mean," answered the girl, gathering courage.

"I know nothing about Nance, and this is my hat and shawl. Let go of my wrist. I am in a hurry—and while you are losing time with me she will no doubt get away if she really wants to."

"I believe ye'r telling the truth, but I want ter know what you're doing around here, anyhow. If you don't want to tell, tip us a ten, and we'll call it square. But I'm going to make my money out of it somehow. If Nance has give me the slip your coin will do as well. Coin I must have."

"I have no money. I have just escaped."

In her desperation Florence was about to tell the truth, but her revelation was cut short by the appearance of some new actors on the stage.

Three or four young hoodlums came drifting along the street, and they were more than "half seas over."

At sight of the shrinking girl and her assailant they gave a unanimous shout, and hurried their steps.

"Hoi, hello! W'ot's all this?" demanded the leader.

"Drap that, Mister Man. Don't yer see it's my sweetheart, that's bin a-waitin' on ther corner fur me, ther last half hour. It's all right, Molly, and if he don't dry up and sherry his nibs you kin see me slug him fur keeps."

"Go soak your head," growled the first villain, not at all pleased with the interruption, but understanding from the appearance of his captive that the young man was a stranger to her.

"It's not your put in, and you better run along before I lay you out. I'm Red Darby, and a bad man to buck against."

"And we belong to ther Sand-Hill Gang, and are a heap sight worse," retorted one of the crowd.

"Better cut it before we pull our guns. We're shooters and stabbers from 'wayback."

"All the same, you must think I'm a fool if you count on it that I'll let you take my

Moll. Move along now, or there will be some carving done, and I'm the man who will do it."

Still retaining the gripe on her wrist, which had never for an instant relaxed, Red Darby thrust the girl partially behind him, holding her there as easily as though she was an infant.

In his other hand he brandished a knife.

"Look out, boys," cried the leader.

"He has a sticker. Get your guns."

It was not the policy of Red Darby to force a fight, and perhaps the production of the knife was mostly for effect, but at the same time he was a veritable bull-dog when aroused, and it was not likely he would give an inch, even though the odds, so far as numbers went, were so much against him.

He saw, however, he was in for it unless he took water, and that was something he seldom did.

As the guns came out he stooped low and thrust viciously at the nearest man, savagely growling:

"Yer will have it. Curse you, I'm able for you all, and I'll show you how to clean out a crowd."

There was a cry of pain from the fellow at whom the thrust was aimed, and then Darby dropped the wrist he had been holding and sprung forward, thrusting and slashing as he came.

One resolute man with a knife can do a great deal in a very short space of time. Several shots were fired without any material damage, and meantime the rough was getting in his work.

Now the hold was no longer on her arm Florence Chase stood like one paralyzed. At the first shot men and boys appeared from every direction. Some attention had already been called to the spot, and now it looked as though a mob would be collected in no time.

She looked helplessly around her.

Already she had lost all sense of direction, and though it almost seemed to her that life itself depended upon flight she did not know which way to turn. A move in the wrong direction might only result in taking her back to the den from which she had escaped, or plunge her into fresh danger.

Shouting, swearing, brandishing weapons, the crowd closed in around her, and she was being hustled this way and that, with a fair prospect of being trodden under foot, even if not struck by some of the missiles which were beginning to fly dangerously near.

Suddenly some one caught her by the arm, and jerked her roughly aside.

"You fool, you, what are you doing here? Out of this, quick, before they find you again."

It was a woman's voice she heard at her ear, and she turned with delight toward her newly-found protector.

"Oh, help me! Save me! Get me out of this! I do not know which way to turn, and if they should see me what could I do?"

"Just what I have been asking. Ah, there is one of the gang, now. This way: I will save you if I can, but you must never let on that I acted your friend. They would murder me if they knew."

The speaker was Moll Bartlett, the woman Bedrock had met in the saloon. Florence, of course, knew nothing of who or what she was, and followed her with delight, so overjoyed at finding one she thought she could trust, that she scarcely noted longer what was going on around her.

Still holding the wrist of her *protegee*, Moll edged her way out of the crowd as speedily as she could, pushing this way and that, and at times exerting all her strength, which was by no means small, to keep from being separated from her companion.

More than one oath was slung at them as they retreated, but in a brief time they were on the outskirts of the throng, and hurrying back along the very course Florence had lately taken.

At the alley from which Red Darby had emerged Moll turned sharply, and was about to plunge into its gloomy recesses, when a fellow sprung to her side.

"No, yer don't, my dear. I want a look at your face before I let you go. Me and my pards stood that boozier off for you, and I guess it ought to be worth that much. And then, if you are going anywhere, I guess I'll go along."

This time Florence found voice to utter a genuine cry of alarm.

It was unfortunate, since it would be apt to bring more of the toughs in that direction, and the fellow was barring the way.

From what he had already seen he had no idea that any resistance would be offered, and was not on his guard, as he would have been if dealing with a man. At the cry he laughed.

"Oh, don't put on sich style, young inner-cence. Your fancy man ain't here to hear it, and if he was I'd lay him out if you said the word. Come! hook on, and I'll be yer best feller to where ye'r' going."

"Out of the way, you ruffian!" hissed Moll, her hand dropping to her skirt with a quick motion.

"You too, deary. I'm a dashed good feller, if you only knowed it, but don't you try to bluff me. It won't work."

"Maybe that will, then," hissed Moll, and she struck him savagely in the face with a clubbed revolver.

"This way, now! There is not a moment to lose. They are coming!"

With Florence's hand in hers she started off on a run, with a view halloo rising behind them.

CHAPTER IX.

MOLL BARTLETT AT HOME.

THE man reeled back from the blow, and Moll darted ahead, striking him down with a second blow even heavier than the first.

The way being clear she lost no time in continuing retreat, followed more closely than ever by the trembling girl.

The alley opened into a court that was partially filled with a pile of old lumber. Had it not been for a light here and there in the neighboring windows there would have been considerable danger in hurriedly threading the narrow little path which led around it.

Fortunately, too, they met no one. The skulkers in that neighborhood were worse than those who paraded the streets openly.

From the surrounding tenements they heard sounds that were terrifying enough to Florence, but her guide went on without even noticing them. The night-revelry, with its ribaldry, and its profanity, failed to shock the ears which had grown accustomed to them during the year of residence in the lower life to which the woman had drifted.

She was more intent upon listening for the sounds of the pursuit she was fearing; and by the time they had almost completed the circuit of the court she was sure she heard them.

"Ah, it is too late!" she suddenly muttered, turning to the girl.

"They are coming from both directions. More of that bloke's gang must have seen us, and they are trying to head us off. They will do it, too, if we try to escape at present. Follow me, and for your life say not a word."

She darted into an open doorway, and made her way along a narrow hall for a short distance, and then began to ascend a rickety stairway.

"Quick, quick! They may have recognized me, and if they have they will follow like hounds on the scent. We could beat them off, but that would be the death of me, and I know you would not have any harm happen to the woman who has tried to be your friend, low down as I may have dropped?"

Florence had hesitated.

This did not seem the way to liberty. To what darksome den might not this narrow staircase be the prelude?

The appeal was too earnest not to be effectual. Her pursuers were not far away now, and even if she held back, what could she do that offered the slightest chance of securing her safety? Again she followed, though inwardly quaking.

Up, up the stairway, and then up others. It seemed there was to be no end of them. Several times they barely escaped meeting persons on the different landings, and on tip-toe they passed open doors through which they could catch glimpses of the criminal squalor which lay within the reeking rooms.

At last they came to the attic, and here Moll appeared to be at home. From her pocket she took a key, and applied it to a

door, which swinging open revealed a little room beyond, in which a feebly burning lamp scarce was able to reveal the surroundings.

After carefully closing and locking the door, Moll turned up the lamp and moved straight forward to a ragged pile in one corner of the room.

"How are you to-night, Harry? I managed to get away an hour earlier than I expected, and brought you a little beer."

The cover was pushed back a trifle, revealing the sharp, pinched face of the man addressed.

"It seemed awful late. Cissy hasn't got back yet, and I thought it was her when I heard her coming. Who is that?"

His gaze fell on Florence, and it seemed to her he shrunk back a trifle as he spoke, covering his head more with the bed-clothing, and almost immediately breaking into a fit of coughing which racked his whole frame.

"Never mind her, dear. She is a girl I picked up in trouble, and brought her here because it was the best I could do. She will do no harm."

"But who is she?" persisted the sick man, with the obstinacy peculiar to an invalid.

"She looks honest enough, but even if she plays us true there may be others who will not, and there is no woman can keep her mouth shut about what she has seen."

"Come, Harry. Did you ever know Moll to go back on you, or wag her tongue about matters she ought to forget?"

"That's true enough, Moll; but you are a woman in a thousand, or you never would have stuck to a wreck like me. But there is something more about this than picking a girl up on the street. Speak up, girl! Who was after her?"

For a moment more the woman hesitated, looking from one to the other as though she had reasons for not speaking, and was weighing them carefully. Finally, she bent over and whispered something in his ear.

"Wrong, Moll, wrong," he answered with a shake of his head.

"She ought never have been brought here. If they saw you it will be all up with me. The old man will send me over the road if he knows we have been putting a finger in his pie. And what will become of you, old girl?"

"But I couldn't leave her out there among those hoodlums. They had spotted her for a victim already. Red Darby and the Sand-Hill Gang were fighting for her when I picked her up, and there was no chance to steer her away. The whole Coast would have been onto us before we got a block. How did you get away from the place you were in?"

She turned to Florence, and spoke sharply. It was the first intimation the girl had that she had been recognized by her rescuer, and for an instant she hesitated what answer to make. So far the woman had been her friend, without a doubt, but she could not help but know there was something evil about this pair, and it was by no means certain it would be wise to trust them with her story. It might make trouble for some one who, stranger though he was, certainly had been her real friend.

"Out with it. I must know what sort of a story to tell if I am cornered, and I don't want to give you away any more than I can help."

"I hardly know myself," was the hesitating answer.

"Some one came to the door and led me out. It was a man, and that is all I can say about him. I was too excited to note more than that he was offering me my freedom, and starting me on the road. He left me so soon that I had no time to ask him questions. I know not how he found me, or where he went to when he left me."

"And is that the story you are going to tell if they get you again?"

"Yes, if I tell any. But they never will get me again. You will not betray me, I am sure, and if you will keep me here to-night I will be safe enough by daylight."

"We will not betray you, that is certain enough, but we may have to give you up to save ourselves. I am not sure they will not be after you sooner than we will be ready for them. There is no place we can hide you here."

"If I was only myself I'd fight the gang and be done with it," groaned the man on the bed.

"But I can do nothing, and we would only be downed for good and all. Curses on it, is it any wonder I would sooner be dead than linger on, only half a man?"

"Hush! There is some one coming now. Cissy, by her step. Do not let her hear you—she must not know there is anything wrong about our visitor. Keep silent a moment. Some one may be with her."

A light step came along the passage, and then there was a key inserted in the lock. When the door swung open the same young girl entered the room that Bedrock had interviewed a few hours previously.

"Thought I was never coming, eh? Well, I'm here now. If you got any jawing to do, let her flicker."

"Pretty time of night for you to be coming in, you little hussy!" snapped Moll, though in a not particularly angry tone.

"Your father might have died in his bed and no one here to help him. Where have you been gadding? And did you do as you were told? You needn't say more than yes, or not, to that last, either."

"Oh, I'm fly. I did, with a great, big yes. And then I got back, and it looked all right up here, so I went down to the Marble Hall ter see 'em dance—an' mebbe snake a foot meself. It's time I was sproutin' er I'll dry right up an' blow away. It's awful slow livin' in a attic. Wish we were back in ther mines ag'in. Who's this?"

Florence had sunk back into a chair when the door opened, and the sharp-sighted miss had failed at first to observe her.

"It's one of the girls from the place, come to sit up with me to-night. Your father is worse, and he may need some one every hour. And I'm clean beat out myself."

"Healthy lookin' gal to hail from sich quarters. Say! She ain't got the paint on thet the old man uses to mark his lambs. Ef I was her, an' got this fur away you bet I'd never go back. Don't yer do it, miss. It ain't no place fur one ov your kind."

"Dry up on that, Cissy!" was the sharp interruption.

"None of us would want to go back if we could get away."

"When you were sober, yes," retorted Cissy, who seemed to be wise beyond her years, and brimful of experience.

"Ef I was her I wouldn't stop here ef I didn't want to go back, for I reckon they count on fetchin' her. Runned away, didn't she? I smelt something in the air an' stagg'd the nibs ov a party. They was talkin' 'bout a gal. Wouldn't wonder if they meant you."

"What did they say, Cissy? Quick! What did they say? Are they coming up here?"

"That's what I'd 'a' made out ov it ef I hed knowed as much as I do now. But, pshaw! Let 'em come. We've stood off a gang afore this an' I guess we kin do it ag'in. I got a gun meself, an' you bet you I know how ter use it."

"Hush that! This is a different matter. Couldn't we get the girl out of the house and away? It may mean death to her and worse than death to us if they find her here."

Hank rose again in bed, and huskily uttered his anxious query, not caring for the fact that by so doing he had more than half taken the child in their confidence.

Instead of answering at once Cissy darted to the door, and opened it a trifle and listened eagerly.

Then she closed the door again, deliberately, and locked it before she answered:

"Reyther late fur any sich scheme. They're on ther stairway now, an' onless she jumps fur it, I can't see how she kin dodge 'em ef they git in here."

"And I only half a man," groaned Hank once more.

"And they know that whatever they do here I darn't squeal."

He broke into a fit of coughing, and it was so loud and hollow it almost drowned the rather gentle rapping that was being done on the door.

"Who is there?" asked Moll firmly, her hand seeking the pocket to which she had returned the revolver after she had used it on the Sand-Hiller.

CHAPTER X.

PETE PARKER'S DEATH-TRAP.

"OPEN up and you'll see. And if you don't want it made warm for Hank you had better be in a hurry about it, too. See?"

"Yes, I do see—that you are not coming in here, nor will I open the door, until I know who you are, and what you want. You can't bluff me worth a cent, and I have laid out better men in my time than you ever dared be, who tried that game on."

"Who is trying to bluff now? No use to beat around the bush. You got company in there that we want to have a talk with. I am coming in in just two jerks of a lamb's tail, and if I have to burst the door it will be all the worse for you. You ought to know that what Pete Parker says always goes."

"It's you is it? Well, there is no company in here, and if there was I wouldn't turn them over to your tender mercies after I once said I wouldn't. Go away, now, before I let blizzard at the door."

Moll was white in spite of her paint, and it was plain that now her passions were aroused she had forgotten the fears of a short time before and was bent on defying the party on the other side of the door.

Her words proved a puzzler to the men, too.

While they were not of the kind to avoid a fight, even to the death, they knew Moll as she could be when on the war-path, and evidently hesitated to make a move. It seemed as though they fell back for the purpose of consultation.

Florence crouched in a distant corner, wild-eyed, and shivering. She had had something to do with the world, and the rougher side of it, but not the roughest, such as she met with here. She knew not which way to turn. These people had said they dared not protect her, and the resistance which the woman was making at the outset would probably be of no avail, and soon cease.

After that, what?

She looked around her and caught sight of Cissy.

The girl seemed to be actually enjoying the situation.

Her shawl was thrown aside, there was a smile on her face, and her hand was thrust under the folds of her dress as though she might be searching for a weapon.

Instinctively Florence edged toward her. It seemed strange the elder should turn to the younger for protection, but there was a reason for it. She of all the quartette was perfectly cool. If she could only be induced to act as a friend what might she not be able to do?

"Will she let them in?" was the question asked by the trembling girl as she touched Cissy lightly on the shoulder.

"Not much she won't let 'em in. She's gittin' her mad up, an' when that gits good and hot she ain't takin' water, nohow. You just stay by me an' I'll see you through. Mam is a whoosher on ther war-path; but I know all the lurks an' ther lays 'round Carter's Court, an' if ther wu'st comes to ther wu'st we'll bilk 'em yit."

"But if they break down the door? We can't get away."

"Wot's ther reason we can't? Don't I tell you ter stick by me, an' ef ther old 'un's can't see yer through I'll take ther contrack. I like yer face, though it looks awful green. Now dry up an' listen ter wot mam's sayin'. It'll be good ez a circus."

"But who is it out there? And where are the police?"

"It's Pete Parker, an' his gang, an' they're the hardest crowd 'round hyer, ef he does speak soft ez silk. An' fur p'lease, ther cops da'ssn't show the'r faces in Carter's Court, and they know it."

She jerked out the information between breaths, and after a disgusted fashion. A crisis was coming, and knowing it she wanted to hear all of the conversation that led up to it.

Something had been lost, however, for Moll was just speaking in response.

"You know me, Pete, and that what I say I mean. Harry is worse than ever to-night, and if you come ramping in here it may be the death of him. I won't have it, boss or no boss. I'd sooner see him alive in the tank than dead in his bed. So now, if you mean

business go ahead with it without any more buzzing. You can't have the girl."

"Didn't I tell you so?" whispered Cissy, nudging Florence with her elbow, and chuckling softly.

"It don't take much to raise her dander, an' when that's up she's so set a riggy mint ov hoss soldiers couldn't drive her back a inch. Watch out now, ther fun's goin' ter begin."

"That so, Moll?" said the voice on the other side of the door, in a grimmer key than had yet been used.

"Mighty sorry to hear it, old girl, because the boss would make it mighty warm for you if he knew that was the way you talked about him behind his back. But it don't matter. There won't be much for him to work on by the time we get through if you don't take that back. We are going to take her out now, or, there will be three inquests in the morning. Which shall it be? Last time of asking."

Moll glanced toward her husband.

It was evident that whether or no she expected to do the fighting, the decision as to her course rested with him.

He was sitting bolt upright in bed, now. His face was more ghastly than ever, with a dead whiteness suggesting the pallor of a corpse, but his eyes were gleaming like living fire.

He nodded toward a shelf a little above his shoulder.

"Give me my gun," he whispered—though he was straining his throat to his utmost to force the words out between his livid lips.

"Hank may be on his back, but I'll show 'em he's game as ever, and can still pull a trigger."

"Cissy!" exclaimed Moll; and the child understood her.

She caught Florence rudely by the arm.

"Hyar, you! git under the bed. Mam's goin' ter open ther door."

With a strength that was remarkable in one so young she urged the frightened girl along, and half forced her down into the position she had named.

Then, she flew to the shelf, and handed down the revolver which was lying there, cocking it as it passed through her hands into those of Bartlett.

"Now, let them come, the cowardly brutes. When Hank was at his best they wouldn't have dared skulk within a mile of his kennel, and I half believe they are scared out by a woman as it is."

Moll curbed her anger, and waited until he had rested the barrel of his weapon over the raised knee, the sharp outlines of which showed distinctly through the wretched bed-clothing.

When the weapon covered the door she advanced and bent down so that her mouth was near to the key-hole.

"You know me, Pete. I am going to clear that floor if you are there when I come out for work. I'm on the war trail, all paint and feathers. Look out for my razor!"

And with this exclamation she swung open the door.

Some little time had been consumed since the distinct threat of Parker to murder the three if there was not an immediate surrender, and there was plenty of opportunity for him and his followers to get out of the way. When Moll glared along the dimly-lighted hall she saw nothing of them.

"Gone, for a duckat! I'm not sorry, on Hank's account, but I'd have liked to give Pete Parker one for good-luck. Of course, he means to blow on me with the old man."

Her reflections suddenly took another turn.

Nothing was to be seen of the thug, but there was a sudden flare of light, a heavy puff of drifting smoke, and then a pistol-shot, aimed at the lamp in her room.

Then, there was the jingle of breaking glass as the lamp went down, and for the moment the room was plunged in darkness.

"Heavens!" exclaimed Moll.

"The scoundrels have set the house on fire!"

She strode toward the bed as she spoke, her first thought of her husband.

At the report he had straightened himself up like the old war-horse he was; but a moment later there came, if possible, a still more ghastly look in his face, he clapped his

hands convulsively to his throat, and then fell back, the blood spurting from his mouth in a bright, red stream.

The woman bent over him with a cry of anguish. The lamp was extinguished, but the flare of the fire burst into the room ahead of the smoke, and revealed the features of the sorely stricken man. When Moll looked down at him he seemed to be breathing his very last.

She threw herself by his side, with her arm around his neck, and her cheek resting against his own chilling one. If Florence could have seen she would have been beside herself.

Cissy was the only person in the room who retained full possession of her wits.

With a quick bound she closed the door to shut out the smoke, already beginning to be oppressive, and then caught her mother by the hand.

"Brace up, mom! This's no time ter be broke. Git a move on er dad an' allo' us 'll go up ther flume. We want ter be hikin' outen this right smart."

"Hush, child! Dad is dead, and I don't care how soon I follow him. Save yourself if you can, but I'm going to stay by him. It's been a tough life, and he was all I had in it that was worth living for. Go! You are better without me. I can do nothing for you. Oh-h-h! Hank!"

She dropped herself down again to the position from which her child had momentarily roused her, and the wail was as genuine that fell from her lips as though she had a heart to break.

"Die, then, ef you wants to! Ye'r' too big fur me ter kerry, an' thar's no sense in both ov us crossin' ther range. Ef you don't skip now you never will. Say ther word an' I'll help ter kerry pap. Ef not—Walker!"

"Go, kid, while you can!" was the faint answer, and without further effort to move the hopeless woman, Cissy darted under the bed, in search of Florence Chase.

By this time the alarm of fire was sounding loud enough outside. The men and women who lived around Carter's Court were pouring out of the dens, some looking upward to mark the exact position of the conflagration, others rushing headlong away from the dangerous spot.

The house was a death-trap for its inmates, and if the fire had started on the lower floor the loss of life in the crowded tenement would have been frightful. As it was, nearly every one of the inmates was able to reach the street. Only those in the attic were entirely cut off.

But in that one room a hideous-looking woman, painted in blushes but blanched to the color of a corpse, crouched over a stiffening body, and neither knew nor cared whether the fire raged or not.

CHAPTER XI.

WRECKED IN PORT.

SAVE for the crackle of the flames, in the room for a few moments all was silence.

The woman was weary enough of life before; now, she listlessly waited for the death she hardly knew was coming. After that one sobbing call to her husband she said no more, and did not even utter a groan. She was past that. Cissy was as totally forgotten as though she had never been, and the sounds that rolled up from Carter's Court, and the streets beyond, never reached her ears.

Yet there was hubbub enough below, one would have thought, to wake the dead.

Perhaps it woke Hank Bartlett. He gave a feeble, almost imperceptible start, and his lips, flecked with blood and foam, moved slightly.

At the same time the smoke which had been shut out by the closing of the door began to find itself in, while the room was growing uncomfortably warm.

The movement, weak though it was, galvanized Moll into life—and terror.

The situation came upon her in all its horror, and in an instant she was glaring around wildly, at last realizing the situation.

"Oh, Hank, Hank!" she cried.

"You are living, after all, and now it is too late. It is my own cursed folly that has brought you to this. There is no way out. I must die, now, and I might have lived and saved you."

There was no answer to this, yet it seemed to her the heart for which she had instinctively felt was beating a little stronger, and a little stronger, every moment.

She caught his form in her arms, and raised him from the bed. At best his was only a light weight—now she did not feel it at all. It was the terrible clutch on her heart, the clutch of despairing terror, that made her stagger rather than walk toward the nearest window. There might be help from below. Surely, this thing had been going on for ages.

The window looked upon the court, and she could only see between the drifting waves of smoke the pile of lumber away down below. Every soul had escaped from the dangerous trap, and there seemed to be no hope for her there.

The roar of the fire now drowned the voices from the street beyond, and any shout of hers would have been lost before it had pierced a yard.

Would help come? Could it come?

She turned grimly away, and tried to look down at the white face lying over her shoulder.

"Poor Hank," she said, her hand finding the dank hair on his forehead, and softly smoothing it back.

"We were a tough pair in our time, but I was true to you, Hank, as far as I could be, and you knew it. Better so. You're not going to wake again, and you won't know that I died with my arms around you. If it was not for the pain and the fear of it I wish that you could. I think—"

With the body still in her arms she groped her way along the wall till she reached the shelf near the bedside.

The smoke was thicker than ever, and was already doing its work in her lungs, but she found what she was after. The bottle of laudanum was still there, and with something like a sigh of relief she drained its contents, and then sunk back on the bed with her face pillowed close to that of the man she had loved.

After that she knew little more, save that the poison was doing its work and that death was coming fast.

"Good-by, Hank," she feebly muttered.

"It seems as though perhaps we're going together. More's the pity. Here's Moll's last kiss, dearie."

Her hot lips closed on his, and then their faces fell apart.

There was a crash as the stairs at the end of the hallway fell in—and another crash as the door came thundering open before the charge of a man who flung his shoulder against it with all the weight of his body following. There was no time then to be trying the lock or thinking of saving fixtures.

"Hyer, you Moll! Whar are ye? It's yer only chance."

There was no answer, but the current from door to open window seemed suddenly to lift the smoke in which the room was shrouded, and the man caught a glimpse of the bed, and the two figures reclining on it.

In his stumbling rush when the door went down he had come almost to the bedside, and had but to reach forward to touch the bodies.

"Holy smokes! They don't answer; kin both be dead?"

Whatever was to be done had to be done quickly. He felt hurriedly for the beating of their hearts, and knew that life still lingered.

"What a corner fur my marm's eldest. Bedrock, it's ther wu'st ov ther season. Cain't tell w'ich are ther corpus, an' w'ich are ther survivor. It's tough lines, but I'll hev ter save 'em both."

He had them already in his arms, one under each, and wheeling without a second thought, plunged straight into the wall of smoke that came pressing in through the doorway.

"Ef it don't kill them it o'r'tn't ter phaze me," was his singular comment, as holding his breath he darted for another door but a few feet distant, and on the opposite side of the hallway.

As he passed through he kicked the door shut, and then pushed on to the window.

"Hank, Hank!" groaned the woman, somewhat aroused by the rough treatment.

"I'll give you Hank, ef you'll jest git a

rustle on and save yerself. Fur a conterdictory bunch ov bones an' flesh give me a woman. I know it, fur I've been married twice."

It was hard lines on the walking philosopher that just at the crisis Moll should have thrown away her own chances, and put a double burden on the daring rescuer.

"What's the matter, Hank? What are you doing to me. Can't you let me rest?" was her sleepy question.

"I'm a-savin' ov ye, dog-gun ye; an' it would 'a' bin money in my pocket ef yer hed stopped a-growin' in yer youth, er hed trained down about ten stun afore this conflagrashun. If you wig glenow we're all three lost."

But the animation was only a flash in the pan, for almost immediately Moll relapsed again into unconsciousness, and Bedrock was saved from any useless trouble.

At the window was a fire escape, though none too easily reached, weighted as he was.

Yet, he made the desperate effort and won.

With his left hand he grasped the nearest rung of the ladder, leaning far over to do it, and under his right arm he clasped the rather ponderous body of the woman, while his fingers clutched the collar of Hank, whose body hung across the window ledge.

Thus heavily handicapped he swung himself out, none too certain in his own mind that the fire-escape would stand the strain, though he never once thought of his own muscles giving way. He had tried them too often to dream of their failing him now.

The iron rung actually bent under the pressure, but it held to its moorings, and for a moment Bedrock hung there, flattened against the wall, and waiting to recover himself for the next move in the game.

To be on the fire-escape was one thing; to descend it was another. Moll's waist was not as slender as it was when he knew her in the days of old, when he had "salivated," the Red Duke on her account.

It was only by a bit of most dexterous play that he was in condition to descend at all, except by the unorthodox one of letting go everything and coming down by the run.

As he dragged Hank's body back from the window-ledge he gave a Herculean twist of the wrist, which fairly cast it over his left arm. After that he had them both encircled in his grasp, and hung on to the ladder with both hands.

Yet it was a dangerous thing to attempt to drop a hand to the next round below, and perhaps he would not have done it without mishap had he not coiled his ankle in a round at the knee of the other leg and braced himself thus for his work.

So, slowly but surely, and without mishap he won his way downward until the little landing at the next story, with its open trap-door, was reached; and all the time the fire was leaping from windows on either side, and the smoke curled down from above to meet the blacker volumes which came sweeping up from below.

In the trap-door of the escape a man was seated, who had been coolly watching the perilous journey, apparently oblivious of the fact that if anything happened to the trio there was every chance of their fall bringing destruction in his direction.

"Ye'r doin' this heat in 'bout two, seven an' a-half," he shouted, as Ragged Rufe made the landing.

"Ett's jest the up-heapiness bit ov style thet I've see'd sence we left the land ov Blazer's Bar. But don't be hoggish, fur ett's a right smart ov a tum'mle ter take, even yit. Pass me a corpse, an' then go 'long down. I'll foller when yer gits ter ther next landin'. Dunno ez the rotten ole lattiss'll stan' ary more on it er I wouldn't be keerin' ter stay thet fur behind. Ett's a burnin' like tinder."

"You blamed fool, yer hed better stayed b'low an' looked after me landin'. Thar's su'thin' rotten 'bout this, an' ef they don't try ter do us when we git thar I'm a howlin' liar, frum over ther ridge. Hyer's yer corpse, though. Hann'le him with keer, fur I ain't sure he's quite dead yit."

Into the arms of the cross-eyed man Bedrock dropped what was left of Hank Bartlett, and then went on down.

The rest of the way was easy; and flame and smoke spurred him on to make time that

would beat the record. When he looked downward he could see upturned faces; and above him squatted Abednego, waiting for him to clear the story before he ventured with his load on the frail support.

"I'm a-gittin' thar," he muttered as he nimbly lowered himself round after round.

"An' w'ot'll be ter pay after I arrove are w'ot's botherin' me. Are this goin' to break up my usefulness with Japhet, er kin I keep in ther swim? Reckon thar's too many ov his heelers in that gang ter try ter lie out ov ther good ackshun, an' ther on'y thing ter do are ter give ther ushual account ov meself in ther row w'ich follers. An' Abednego—he'll be thar too."

He reached the foot of the second story, and hesitated.

Trinnfador was coming now, and in a moment would be beside him. He was as reckless as though he counted his fortune in farthings instead of thousands, but it was as well to have the cross-eyed man at his back. The crowd below was shouting, but that went for nothing. He wondered if it would not begin shooting soon.

The walls above were growing hotter, and here and there just above him smoke and flame was creeping and curling out through the siding. Trinnfador let go his hold half a dozen rungs above and came dropping down.

At that the platform burst from its moorings, and as the four fell in the wreck Pete Parker and his gang sprung forward with a howl.

CHAPTER XII.

TRINNFACTOR SHOWS HIS HAND.

NEVER a cat fell more lightly on its feet than did Bedrock, though to save himself he had to loosen his grip upon the woman. There was something of a shock, of course, but he bounded rapidly forward, straight at the snarling crowd, without stopping to see how it fared with his companion.

Trinnfador was less fortunate. When the platform gave way he was naturally thrown off his balance, and when he reached the pavement he stumbled, and then fell headlong, lying motionless, as though stunned or badly hurt.

At Ragged Rufe's furious charge Pete Parker and his bullies halted.

It was Moll and her husband they were after, and when Bedrock dropped the woman they would as soon as not have done no more business with him.

After a brief hesitation, which was just long enough to enable Pete to plant himself squarely in Bedrock's way, the gang spread out on either side.

There was danger the tramp would be flanked and it was not by instinct he divined their intentions.

He had heard something of their talk before dashing in to the rescue, and believed the rookery had been burned to accomplish the destruction of the two Bartletts, and that it was being done for the sake of none other than Japhet Grigson.

As for the whys and wherefores, he did not trouble himself about them at all. He simply struck at Pete as hard as he knew how, and then dodged back in his effort to keep the crowd all in front of him.

He was not at all alarmed about their numbers, and did not build on interference from other spectators who he knew must be near. He was relying on himself alone, with perhaps a little collateral assistance from the cross-eyed man, if that worthy came to time.

But Pete Parker, though little more than a middle weight in size, was a host in himself, and had no mean science.

The blow of Bedrock ought to have connected according to the theory of the tramp, but it did not. It went glancing over Pete's forearm—though Parker's savage return was just as much a failure. The big man was too light on his feet to be reached, and was already out of distance.

"Ye would, would ye? Not this evenin', me boy!" shouted Bedrock, as he darted to one side and struck left and right, staggering one man, and putting another out of the fight.

"Yer Onkle Bedrock are around fur sure, an' sleggin' are jest w'ot he does on. Git down in front er I'll knock yer down!"

Then he leaped to the other side and sent in a couple more blows, though with not quite as good a success. One man dodged back enough to break the force of the stroke, while the other parried with a neatness that showed he was almost a professional himself.

This was the preliminary skirmish, and in it all parties had taken the measure of the work in hand.

"Not a gang ov 'okard hoodlums," thought Rufe, gathering himself together warily.

"These be fighters w'ot it'll be a pleasure ter meet; an' I must be a-doin' ov 'em jestiss."

And Pete Parker recognized they had struck a hurricane, and that with the odds all against him the man of rags would be apt to render a good account of himself. Until he was down it would be of no use to try to get at the Bartletts.

He gave a signal, and the men closed up again, and with Pete in the center made a concerted rush at the tramp. He struck out as straight from the shoulder as he had ever done, and just as hard, and one man less was in the ranks in front of him, but that made no matter. They were bunched for a sacrifice, and Pete was glad enough to get off with so little loss. Before Primrose could strike again they were upon him.

The building above was blazing merrily, and every one else had drawn back. As yet there seemed to be no engines on the spot—or on that side of the building at least, and there was plenty of light and room for the fight of the season.

Half a dozen hands clutched at Bedrock, and almost as many fists shot out, aimed at his head. What could one man do against so many, except pull the guns he always carried handy?

But the tramp was not satisfied it had gone far enough yet for that. It took more than one stiff rap to knock him out; he was hard to reach anyway, and had an idea he would be doing something meantime.

His head dodged this way and that. He yielded to a pull when it suited him; and made the wrench received from one side offset the tug on another. It was pretty lively hustling, that might have taken all the fight out of an ordinary man, but was what he called fun-amazing. There was what would have looked to an outsider to be a confused jumble of men, wildly struggling with a common center.

Then, the mass of humanity parted, and Bedrock came striding out, striking as he came.

With the points of his elbows he had broken several ribs, with his iron knuckles he cut more than one face to the bone, and with at least three men on his back he had never gone down save as a means for a mighty rise, that cast one man half a dozen yards away, where he lay groaning.

Yet Ragged Rufe was not satisfied.

While all this was going on what could be done for the two rescued from the building? Both of them were so near to it that a few moments more of neglect might prove their death. It was with a wicked delight he saw the assailants again fell back, and heard Pete Parker sing out:

"Pistols, boys! Finish the job and cut it; the crowd will be down on us if we don't."

"That lets me right in whar I live!" yelled the tramp.

"I travel on ther muscle s'long ez ett hez a show, but guns are my best holt. Han's up! Ther cub ez touches a we'pin dies."

As if by magic his hands had filled, and as he spoke he was looking grimly over his revolvers, covering first one and then another of them with the pistol in his right, but all the time keeping Pete Parker lined with the one in his left.

The men stood with weapons half drawn.

They had already tested the weight of the snag against which they had run, and knew there was that in voice and eye which meant shoot.

Pete Parker's exploding pistol seemed to give them the signal.

Instead of raising their barrels every man who had a revolver at all available gave it a half turn and fired from the position without appearing to take aim. Where there were so many chances it scarcely seemed likely that all the lead would go wrong.

Down went the old man, and it was hardly noticed that he fell with his head toward them. The game they were after now lay beyond, and a trifle to one side. Past Bedrock streamed the rush, without pause, or hesitation. The crumpled heap at the feet of the wrecked fire escape drew them like a magnet.

If there was life in Hank Bartlett and his wife they meant to stamp it out.

But behind them came the suddenly resurrected form of Primrose, who was far too cool to do the wholesale murder that was within his power. Before they suspected his dodge he was among them, and at work. A twist of either wrist clubbed the revolvers he was loth to let leave his hands until he was certain of his advantage in the fray, and first right and then left he brought the iron-bound butts down on the nearest heads.

Even then he would have been too late to save Hank had it not been for Trinnfador.

The latter had really been stunned by his fall, though it was only for a brief space.

When he staggered to his feet his first thought was for the body of Hank Bartlett. He was taking care of it when the accident occurred, and it was natural his bulldog disposition should cling to the one idea until his wits were fully back.

He rubbed his eyes in a dazed sort of way, and stared at the motionless figure.

"Humph!" he said, as he noted the way in which Harry lay.

"Fu'st burnt ter de'th, an' then neck bruk; ef some fool would cut his throat, an' nother sock in a lead pill, it'd make it toler'bly sure. W'ot's ther w'ichness ov totin' a corpse ary furdur?"

He turned slowly, for as though in answer to his thought he caught the crack of Parker's pistol, and heard the "hist" of its bullet, as it zipped by, dangerously close to his own head.

After that came the volley and the rush; and in the way of the latter Abednego threw himself, as careless of consequences as ever Bedrock had been.

"Warp ett to 'em, pard!" he shouted, punctuating his remarks with a blow from the shoulder.

"We got 'em in a box, an you bet we'll be makin' ov 'em jingle."

Pete Parker went down at last, and Primrose was doing good work in the rear. It was more than the gang could stand.

"Nough! 'nough! old man! Hold yer hands an' we'll git out of the wilderness. You carry too many guns for us."

One of the crowd that was out of the line of battle made the surrender, and he thought he had done it just in time.

Bedrock had twirled his guns around again so his hands clasped the butts, and was shouting, while a detachment of the Fire Department was coming up with a run, followed by a crowd that might take a hand in, to the disadvantage of the desperadoes who had made such a bitter fight.

"Git, then, afore we go ye with the guns!"

"An' take yer carr'on with yer," added Trinnfador, pointing at the senseless leader.

"It's a heap sight fuss an' mighty leetle feathers, but eff we'd reelly bin in ther mar-ket fur a fight, it might 'a' bin ther other way."

Before the determined front of the two men the gang shrunk away, carrying the unconscious Parker between them. They had fought until they were away beyond the safety line, and now they began to see a rope in the distance. If they could not silence the Bartletts—and as yet they did not know whether Hank and Moll were alive or dead—a word from them might put a mob on them which there would be no resisting.

They seemed to be used to lurking and skulking.

In no time they were lost in the crowd which opened for them, and then swallowed them up without further notice.

Bedrock, suspicious of treachery, watched them as long as he could, and then turned to his pard:

"Now, ole man, ett's time ter git a russel on. Ef they ain't handed in a'ready, ett won't be long afore they do, ef we don't help 'em over ther rough places. Take yer man, an' I'll see w'ot I kin do fur ther lady."

So, each with a burden in his arms, they staggered away.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE COURAGE OF A CHILD.

Cissy had been up after the fashion taught by the doctrine of the survival of the fittest.

When she arrived in this world she was greeted with anything but rapture, and before she was six months old was left as far as possible to shift for herself. What affection Moll had for anything belonged to Hank, strange as it may seem; and the child was a distinct interference. About that time they had begun to play in hard luck, and the succeeding illness of Hank, which after a number of years had brought him to his present pass, had already begun.

Nevertheless, there were worse girls in the world than Cissy.

True, she knew all the slang of both the mining camps and the slums of the city, and could speak carelessly of things that would have chilled Florence to the marrow to have heard of, but she was honest as times go, seldom swore herself, and could be loyal to a friend as though she had never slept within the purlieus of Carter's Court.

Strange though it might seem, Moll knew she could trust the child to death, and little as they had given her beyond a bare roof and crusts, her loyalty to her parents had never been seriously impaired. When she had sent her away to look out for herself so carelessly it was certain that all thought of the child's danger was swallowed up in her sorrow for Hank. Otherwise she might have spoken differently.

"No use ter worry 'bout mam when she talks that way," thought the child, as she dove under the bed.

"I can't heft her, an' she wouldn't let me tetch Hank; I'll jest hev ter hus'sel fur me-self, an' the gal. Luckily I know how."

From what she had said it was plain she had recognized Florence as not belonging in the scale of the waiters at Japhet Grigson's, and felt that without a guide from that trap of destruction in which they were caught the stranger was hopelessly lost.

Florence was cowering on the floor.

Under ordinary circumstances she might have faced death and never quailed, but all she had gone through within the past few days had weakened her body and broken her nerve. She made no outcry, but lay there, with her face in her arms, and quiver-ink like a leaf.

"Oh, brace up!" shouted the little rescuer in her ear.

"You ain't a-goin' ter die, nohow, an' so ther's no ust ter be a-whimpin'. Ain't I with yer, ter take yer through ther rocks? Git over a bit. Ye're a-lyin' on it."

She pushed Florence aside, giving her a rough shake as she did so, and then felt eagerly over the floor.

"Hyer it is, an' hyer's my nail. Ef you on'y ain't too big we'll go through slick ez good grass."

The flooring of the room was stout, and apparently well laid, though the boards were of irregular width, varying from six to about ten inches.

Under the bed there was a palace where a short piece of the wider sort had been used to patch in, and under one corner of this Cissy inserted the nail, and without much effort pried the piece up, revealing an opening bottomed by the lath and plaster of the room below.

"I got on ter it when mam war away, an' dad asleep, an' I war a-watchin' him. Thar's a hole I made with ther nail, an' high fun I hed watchin' McGlaughlin beatin' his wife an' kids. I reckon they've skipped by this time, an' ef they haven't they're too drunk ter bother. Stick yer head down. Ef et'll go through ther hole ther rest will. An' ef don't—you're in a bad way. We can't make it bigger."

Florence heard without understanding, and crouched there mute and motionless, so Cissy took the matter in her own hands, banging down the head of the girl with slender care of consequences, rasping her nose against the hard edge of the flooring with a force which brought blood in a stream.

"Good ernuff! Thar's a inch ter spare. But ef you don't git a wiggle on it'll be play-in' it mighty low down on me. See?"

Seating herself at the edge of the opening she knocked the lath below from its

place by a few vigorous blows of her feet, and then caught Florence fiercely by the shoulder.

"Ef I war sich a ninny ez you I'd go soak my head, sure. Put yer feet down thar—you won't, won't you! Thar now!"

Savagely she twisted Florence's feet around and thrust them through the opening.

"We can't reach ther 'scape frum this story, but we kin frum that. Ef yer lose me jest look outen ther winders tell yer finds it. I'm goin' ter hev one more try fur mam an' dad. Look out! Down yer goes. Mebbe ther stairs aren't afire below, anyhow."

She gave a push as she ceased speaking, but kept a hold on Florence's shoulder. She was strong beyond her age and size, and kept the girl from taking the drop too suddenly.

Florence clutched at the floor, gave a scream, and then dropped downward.

"Ef she ain't a nat'ral born fool she kin save herself; now fur mam."

Backing out from under the bed she was just in time to see Moll drain the bottle of laudanum.

"Why, it's p'izen!" was her horrified thought, remembering the caution which had been given her as to the effects of an overdose on her father, or a taste of it on herself.

"Pon me soul, she's throwed up ther sponge!"

For the first time too horrified to speak she watched her mother throw herself down again by the side of Hank, and lie without sign of life.

"She's dead a'ready, it's time fur me ter hike!" she said at last, with something like a sigh, and darted under the bed.

In the room below Florence was standing almost where she had dropped, staring around her without any idea of which way to turn. Left to herself she would have remained there till doomsday.

Once out of sight of her mother, and Cissy was herself again. The coolness came back to her brain, and she was as careless of death and danger as she had ever been.

The room was rather large, but the furniture was next to nothing.

There was a rough pine table, several rickety benches, a broken cook-stove, and several heaps of what seemed to be rags, and nothing else. The latter would not have attracted the serious attention of one in a hundred at any time, yet scarcely had she landed lightly on her feet when Cissy pounced swiftly upon the largest, and thrust back the top of it.

A man lay there, a brawny, bloated, beetle-browed man, sleeping the sleep of the drunken.

"Hyer, you! Ketch hold. Ef we hedn't come he'd 'a' been a goner. Waltz him out ov this, an' mebbe he'll come 'round ter help hisself, but he looks jest too full ov booze ter be wuth a cent."

She gripped his collar and tugged as she spoke. Seeing that Florence did not move she struck the fellow in the face with her fist as hard as she could send it.

"Wake up, Pat! Ther house are on fire, an' you want ter git outen this er you'll croak."

Pat made a feeble effort to move his head, gave a grunt, and then began to snore. It would take more than one such blow,—more than a dozen—to waken him.

There was only one course to take.

She darted at Florence and gave her a swinging hit in the face.

"You hear me, say! Git a move on, er I'll kill you with a club. You wuthless, nasty coward! Ketch hold ov him, an' go ez I tell yer er I'll kill you!"

She stamped on the floor in her anger, and then leaping at the bewildered girl once more, began to rain blows on her face.

The treatment was heroic, but it was effectual.

It gave Florence something to think of besides the danger which had benumbed her, and though some precious moments were lost she finally was brought to see the body of the senseless man, and understand what Cissy wanted.

"We kin save him ef you'll take hold," insisted the child; and the words were too full of courage not to give some hope. Between them the two dragged Pat McGlaughlin toward the door.

When the door was flung open Cissy was for a moment staggered.

The fire had not made as much headway as upon the story above, but it seemed the fire-bugs had lighted the flames along the stairway from the top to the bottom, and the open path for the flames drew like a chimney, and the howl was like the roar of a wild beast.

It was too much for them to face. They turned from it, and slowly dragged the heavy body of the man toward the other end of the hall, which ended in a window.

No hope there, apparently—yet the movement was their salvation.

An open door at one side took them into a room which Cissy had never visited before, and here they found a stairway.

"All right! Pluck brings luck, an' dad's said it a thousand times. Down we go!"

Behind them thumped Pat's heels from step to step, and the body seemed heavier on each landing, but they never deserted their charge, and at last emerged on the street, safe and unharmed, and on the opposite side of the house from the one on which lurked Peter Parker and his gang.

"Drap ther brute thar!" said Cissy, with proper scorn, the moment they had got a few feet away from the building.

"Some 'un 'll find him, an' ef they don't he won't be no great loss. We got ourselves ter look after now."

There was no danger but what Pat would be found, since there was a crowd in the neighborhood, who greeted the appearance of the party with something like a cheer, and came hastily toward them.

Cissy did not mean to be interviewed.

Catching hold of Florence's hand she dodged through without giving an answer to a single question, or delaying for a minute. Before any one thought of stopping them they were swallowed up, they had crossed the street, they were hoping they were out of danger.

"Now then," said Cissy, turning to her companion as they halted for breath:

"I reckon I'm a homeless orphlin, but I ain't goin' back on yer tell I see yer safe. Jest tell me whar yer wants ter be landed an' I'll put yer thar er bu'st a wheel."

In a few words Florence gave her an idea of why she had been at Moll's and where her own home was.

"Dunno ez I know ther spot, but ef we kin git nigh enuff ter ther locate ter strike color reckon we kin find it. Come on."

Hand in hand the two girls plunged into the mazes of the streets that were doubly dark after leaving behind them the glare of the fire, the younger leading the way.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DANGERS OF THE TOWN.

Cissy had expended her last coin when she gave the nickel to Bedrock. Street cars were not to be thought of; and anyhow she would scarcely have known which ones to take when she got where they were running. She could find her way pretty well over the city on a dark night, but had never patronized the public conveyances, nor did she know how to utilize them.

Her only thought for the present was getting her charge away from that dangerous quarter of the city, where at any moment they were liable to stumble upon some of the men from whose clutches they had so narrowly escaped.

After that it would be time enough to make inquiries as to the proper course to take to reach the residence of the Chases.

"Come 'long now," she said, as Florence's steps seemed to falter.

"If you war me you'd want ter git away too. Ough! I can't bear ter think ov it. Dad an' mam both. But they was dead, so what's the dif? Saves the city a pair ov boxes, an' makes me a or'fin. Don't talk ter me about it an' mebbe by to-morrer I'll furgit."

The words of Cissy called the girl from her own troubles to those of her companion. Her hand tightened on the fingers within her own, and she would have uttered words of consolation had not Cissy choked her off.

"Quit that foolin'," she said, decidedly.

"I'm a or'fin, but that's no reason why I should turn on ther water-works. Dad wouldn't have it so, an' mam would thrash

meef she could see me at it. Weep over yer own affairs ef yer want ter, I'll be bound you'll have enough ter do."

"Strange child," thought Florence.

"She must have a heart or she would never stick by me: yet how little she shows it. Poor girl! It is precious little love her parents have lavished on her or she could not leave them for a stranger. I will see she is cared for as far as it lies within my poor means, and if that fortune should come we have sometimes hoped for she shall never want for anything."

It was well enough to think this, but that fortune seemed a long way off a moment later when the child suddenly stopped with a low-breathed warning.

"Ef you war on'y a leetle 'un like myself we could give 'em ther slip, but ef they're after us I really dunno what ter do. This way, an' ef you see me scatter, run."

She turned a corner and began to slip along at a great pace, though not actually breaking into a run.

Before they had gone a dozen steps they heard the clatter of boots striking the sidewalk at a rapid rate.

"Be sure," panted the child, looking over her shoulder.

"I'm a-comin' round ther corner. Hyer you are. No use ter yell fur a p'lice-man. Thar ain't a cop within a mile. Thar, never is ef he's wanted, though they kin be 'round pokin' the'r noses inter places whar they got no bizziness. Foller me. We may make it yit. I know all ther dodges."

She started into an alley, over which, had it been daylight, they might have seen the sign, "Private way. Dangerous."

Before they had gone very far they came to an open cellar, and into this the two dropped, waiting with bated breath to hear the steps of their pursuers.

The steps went pounding past the mouth of the alley, and for a little nothing more was heard of them. Florence hoped they had thrown the hounds off the track, if it was their trail they were baying.

After a little, though, they came softly back. Danger makes quick ears or they might not have noticed the faint sounds.

"They're not down the street—couldn't have got away that quick. Must have dodged in somewheres. What's the matter with this alley?"

"Ther's a big dog what's the matter with it, but ef you say so I guess we're able fur him. Ef they're thar we got 'em, sure. You kin stay here to see they don't slip out, an' Bill an' me'll go in an' roust 'em out ef they're thar."

"Go along with you, then, and keep a look out they don't climb into a window."

"Wish we hed," whispered Cissy, nudging her companion.

"Eit's too late now, an' ef they find us we must dodge an' run. I'll take keer ov that one at the street. When you hear my pop, don't stop ter ask questions but git."

The fellows came stumbling along until they were so near the girls scarcely dared draw breath.

"Don't hear anything ov 'em: do you, Bill?"

"No hide ner hoof. Guess they didn't come in here, after all."

What else he was going to say remained unspoken. His foot slipped, he gave a lurch forward, and stumbled headlong into the cellar.

The fall was a heavy one, and for a moment he did not move.

Then he partially raised himself up, and began to groan terribly.

"What's ther matter, Bill? Are yer hurt?"

"Oh! Ah! Yes. I b'lieve I've broke a leg. Come down here and strike a match. I'm afraid to move."

The other felt around cautiously before he would risk making a movement in that direction. After he had the position of the rickety old stairs properly located in his mind he began the descent.

Bill continued to groan, and haste was called for. The sound guided fairly well, and soon he knelt by the side of his pard, and was striking a match.

He held it up in the air, watching till the flame began to burn bright and clear. Then,

as he lowered it, so as to obtain a view of his pard, he saw Florence's face, her great wild eyes staring at him from out of the darkness.

"Great Scott!" he gasped. "What's that?"

"Whar, Billy? What yer monkeyin' over?"

There was no immediate answer. The match had been cast down, and the fellow had given a great spring, which carried him almost to the side of Florence.

"I've got her!" he yelled, throwing out his hand toward her wrist.

"Keep yer shirt on a minnit an' I'll be with yer."

He had seen the wild look of terror in the gleaming eyes, and never for a moment thought of resistance.

Had it depended on Florence there would have been none. She had begun to believe struggling was hopeless, and to fear that any help she might summon by an outcry was likely to make her fate the worse.

But there was nothing like fear about Cissy. She was too young, and too well seasoned for that.

The flame of the match revealed more to her than it had done to the man who lit it.

As he took the leap she flung herself forward, arching her back as she stepped to her hands and knees, and when he went sprawling over the unexpected obstacle she wriggled out and was by the side of Florence.

"This hyer way! Git a hussel on a fer I hev ter slug him fur keeps. Golly, I teller cops should come down on us they could run you an' me inter ther tanks fur sure, an' be huntin' them fellers ez witnesses in ther mornin'."

Florence yielded to her touch, and the moment she had taken a step the spell seemed to be broken. Together they darted out of the cellar, and headed straight for the mouth of the alley, apparently oblivious of the fact that one of the gang was still there on guard, and they could hardly hope to pass him unnoticed. The way was scarcely wide enough for two to walk abreast.

Cissy was thinking, though, and was desperate enough to take any means to clear the way.

"Stoop low, so he can't see yer," she whispered, suiting the action to the word though her little finger scarcely reached to Florence's shoulder.

The man was leaning forward, listening, which did not increase their chances. Something of the racket in the cellar had reached his ears.

Yet there never was a more surprised hoodlum than he when two figures rose up in front of him, and a revolver was discharged full in his face. The gun which Cissy carried was only a battered old twenty-two caliber but it could make a noise—and bite pretty sharply, too.

The conical ball struck him fairly on the forehead, and then glanced along under the scalp, without making even a dint on the bone, while the shock was not heavy enough to stun.

But he was bewildered none the less. A little more and he would have been felled to the ground.

Cissy did not know how much damage her shot had done, but it was really a relief when she saw he only staggered back, clapping a hand to his forehead in a wild, instinctive motion. It was not likely he would give any more trouble, for the present at least.

The road was open, and she was quick to take advantage of the situation. Past him streaked the two, and once more their feet were pattering along the street.

"Who were they?" gasped Florence, when they had got some little distance from the spot, and it seemed they were safe for the present.

"Oh, some ov the hoodlums thet never lets a chance go by. They thought us two might ante up a case betwixt us—an' they'd 'a' bin willin' ter cut two throats fur a quarter, an' steal a storebox ter throw in fur a coffin."

CHAPTER XV.

CAUGHT, CAGED, AND WAITING—FOR WHAT?

"But was there no way out of the alley save this?" asked Florence, shivering slight-

ly as she thought the mere child at her side might have taken a human life for all they knew.

"Bet yer there was, but we didn't want ter take it. It would 'a' brung us right out in front ov ther boss's saloon. Ef he wasn't on ther watch sum ov his men would 'a' bin, an' they'd 'a' run us down, sure."

After all the distance they had walked—and to Florence it seemed as though they must have gone a mile—they were not yet out of the dangerous vicinity which the poor girl had been hoping was left far behind.

"Which way will we go now?" she asked, as Cissy hesitated at the next turning.

"Can't we ever get away from this spot?"

"I kin, but I ain't so sure 'bout you. By gum, I believe I'll risk it."

There were dark forms flitting here and there, but none of them halted. No one seemed to give a glance after the fugitives. For a little it seemed as though they were actually to escape without further notice.

Nevertheless, from time to time, Cissy cast an anxious glance backward. Things were not always what they seemed in this quarter, and she knew the dangers of the street through which she was attempting to pass.

"I tell yer, I'm afeared we're follered," she said at length.

"An' I guess it's none ov them hoodlums neither. Ef what they say are so it's a heap-sight wuss."

"Let us run, then," exclaimed Florence, quick to take alarm.

"We da'ssn't run," was the answer.

"Down yer yer jest slips along, head down, sayin' nothin', an' only a-peekin' out ther corners ov yer eyes. Then, mebber, ef there's nobody follerin', ye'r all right. But ef they see a gal a-runnin'—shoo! Thar ain't a kid knee high ter a duck ez wouldn't chuck a stone at her. An' ther bigger kids—oh, my! They's ther wust ov all. Keep along stiddy, an' trus' ter luck. I got six loads in my pup yit."

A drunken woman came staggering toward them.

Perhaps she heard something of their conversation, for Florence had raised her voice incautiously high, while the sibilant tones of the younger had a great carrying power in the night air.

"W'ozzer mazzar, dearie? Cain't Lovin' Bets help yer any? Jess tell me all yer troubles, an' ef any one wants her bozzer ye, Bets are ther one ter stan' 'em off. I've a cheyld ov me own an' I kin shimpathize."

Keenly alive to the possibility of a profit, even in her maudlin state, the woman lurched forward and attempted to throw her arms around Florence's neck. When the girl swiftly eluded her clutch she staggered by, cursing as she went.

The episode hardly startled them. Florence had got used to worse, and Cissy had seen too many drunken women in her time. There was little danger from the woman so long as she did not get her clutches on one of them, or make an outcry.

At the same time, it distracted their attention and they forgot the danger they had feared was menacing them from the rear. The steps behind were so light they never heard them, and their first intimation of being overtaken was the grip of fingers that seemed talon-like, and a foreign-sounding voice, saying in a low, oily tone:

"Mellican girley wantchee golo slow. She maskee bobbly, Highbinder cut'l thloa allee samee chop-chop. Sst."

With a sharp hiss the warning ended, and scarcely was it given before the need of it was over. They could have made no outcry if they had tried.

Cissy's hand made one savage dart for the revolver in her pocket, and failing in the effort she resigned herself to the inevitable.

After that, there was nothing further said but the girls were hurried away.

There was little danger of interference there, anyhow, unless by some one who thought he should have a hand in the game whatever it might be; and the captors seemed to understand the mazes of the quarter even better than Cissy had done. They dodged through this alley and that "hole in the wall," half-dragging, half-carrying their prisoners, and finally entered a building, the outside of which the girls were

not permitted to see, since their eyes were blindfolded long before reaching it.

Once within and all around was gloomy silence. The sandaled feet made no sounds as they fell upon the floor, and it was only by feeling the ascent that they knew they were mounting a flight of stairs. Then, they were thrust into a room, the door of which swung to heavily, and the creaking of the bolt in the lock appeared to tell them they were caged beyond hope of escape.

They were not injured by the rough treatment, however, and before a minute elapsed had found each other in the darkness.

"Where are we now?" asked Florence, somewhat recovered from her bewilderment.

"Blam'f I know," was the ready answer.

"May be in Chinytown, may be in Noo York. They hus'sled along so lively I war afeared we'd git to ther moon afore we stopped. Sounded like a Chink when he war a-talkin', but I didn't git no chance ter see him right. I'd sooner think they war a pair of Japh's lambs, what war out lookin' fur some wolves ter devour."

"Japh?"

"Yeh."

"Who is he?"

"Bless yer soul, how innercent! Mebbe you don't know it war his ranch you got away from? An' mebber you didn't know mam there, an' mebber it ain't bin his lot that war workin' ag'in' yer? Ef yer don't, p'raps I'm talkin' too fresh."

"I thought I told you enough so that you could understand. I only know I was seized by some villains, carried some distance in a hack, hurried along some such dreadful streets as those we have been wandering in, and then confined in a room where I never saw a soul, and my food was set in for me while I was asleep."

"An' yer got out, all by yerself alone?"

"No. A rough-looking, strange-talking man found me there and started me away. Then some men tried to interfere, then there was a fight among them, your mother found me and took me to her home. You know the rest."

"But what's it all about?"

"I cannot tell you, for certain, but I think there is money behind the trouble. We have lately found out that perhaps mother and I are entitled to a fortune that is now in the hands of others. Oh, if I thought that anything had happened to her, too, I think I would give up."

"I wouldn't do that, not fur nothin'. I'd hold on ter life, keep my grit up, an' git that money ef it war in ther wood. Japh Grigson are a hard one ter fight ag'in', an' he hez a gang at his back, but I'd raise another gang an' clean him out if it took a wheel. I'm goin' ter see ef thar's ary show ter git outen this. Can't do much in ther dark, but it don't hurt ter allers keep rustlin'. That's ther way us poor brats make a livin', an' ez long ez I kin keep it up you bet I ain't a-goin' ter die."

The investigations, however, were soon made.

The room was small, bare, and the window in addition to being securely fastened was covered with a stout shutter.

Without tools, and with no more strength than was in their feeble hands, it looked as though they must resign themselves to the inevitable and patiently wait for developments.

In the light shed upon the purposes of these men by the burning of the tenement, and the sacrifice of Moll and her husband, would they bring anything but murder?

CHAPTER XVI.

BEDROCK ON THE PROMENADE.

THE young man—and he was very young, and more innocent than he knew—who had charge of the branch office of the Western Union something like a dozen squares from the scene of the conflagration of the night before, looked around as a hard-looking tramp shuffled in. Then, he went back to his reading.

Nevertheless, he must have had eyes in the back of his head for the moment Bedrock timidly fingered a blank he raised up and shouted:

"Get out of here!"

"Eh?"

The answer was faintly given, after the manner of one hard of hearing, and only served to raise the anger of the mighty potentate behind the screen.

"Get out of here! No. There is nothing for you here, and we allow no loafers."

The tramp took off his hat and made a low obeisance before speaking. In the depth of his humility his battered old tile seemed to sweep the floor. Then, in a husky tone, almost a whisper, he asked:

"Who's a-loafin'?"

"You won't be long if you don't get a move on," retorted the fellow, making a sudden dive for the drawer, and pulling out a remarkably small-sized revolver.

"I don't want to mop the floor up after you, but I must observe the rules. *Git!*"

It was a broad joke, so the fellow thought, and he had his fun out of it in the ghastly look of horror which came into the battered face he was gazing at.

"I don't shut! Fact are, me limbs refuse ter Kerry me. Ef that thing went off—Say, mister, turn it t'other way, please. It's reely dangersome, an' ef it went off w'd take keer ov me weepin' wife an' chil'ren?"

It was painful for the young man to suppress the grin that was trying to get around his lips, but he did it, and added fiercely:

"You can bet the company won't. There is one of your breed coming in every hour in the day, and the company just answered my requisition with this, and told me to use it. Are you going to get, or are you not?"

"Ez wharfore should I git?" meekly queried Bedrock, as he quietly deposited a revolver of enormous caliber on the ledge, while he calmly began to write a message.

"Ef I hev mistook ther place, tell me ov it. Ef not, send that."

He was writing as he spoke, and when he had finished, thrust the blank over toward the young man and waited.

Between the revolver and the message the young man was in a quandary.

He began to believe the meekness was all assumed, and that he had to do with a more desperate case than he had supposed. And if this was a *bona fide* telegram, suppose the fellow wanted it sent collect? The possibility of paying the quarter out of his pocket and thus saving his hide never occurred to him. He almost believed for an instant that he was doomed, and his toy gun dropped from his fingers.

"See here, my man, this won't do. There is no use to try to bluff me," he said, in a wonderfully milder tone.

"We can't take such stuff collect."

"Wot's axin' ov yer ter take it collect? Wot's ther damidge?"

The operator advanced cautiously and picked up the message, which was written in a fair hand, and properly punctuated. This was what he read:

"LAWRENCE OLDGORT,

"Centennial Hotel, Oakland.

"Trail ended in a blaze. Expect the worst. Come over if possible. Answer."

"BEDROCK."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated the combination of clerk and operator.

"Are you a detective?"

"Su'thin' like it. Take yer change outen that."

The tramp threw down a twenty from a roll of bills, and waited smiling.

"Have to keep a guarantee," said the fellow, reassured, as he dove again into his drawer, to look up with a grin.

"Sorry, but I am afraid I cannot change it. Is that the smallest you have?"

"Oh, thar's a half, ef yer bothers with sich small change. Didn't think arytin' less ner a sawbuck'd go down hyer."

"And your address," added the young fellow, as he made the change.

"We should know where to send the answer when it comes. Is you name Reed?"

"Naw. Jest Bedrock. Rattle it off an' I'll wait till she comes."

Customers as yet were scarce, and the operator, after sending the message, was inclined to be sociable, but Primrose would have none of him. The fact was, he wanted to have a chance to think over matters, and

could do it as well while waiting for his answer as any other time, if this numskull would cease bothering him. He got his back against the wall and stood mute as the Sphinx, so that he was soon left entirely alone, though an admiring glance was occasionally cast his way.

A detective "under cover" was a sight to make angels rejoice, and this young man was only human.

It took some time for Bedrock to arrange his ideas, and about the time he had succeeded, along came an office message:

"Oldcort left Centennial Hotel.

"OAKLAND."

"All right. That's ez good ez a answer," said Bedrock, when he heard the news, and he tramped out without another word, leaving the young man to wonder who the strange character really was.

"That's jest my luck," thought Primrose to himself, when he got on the street again.

"Young man missin', an' ondoubtedly come over ter Frisco. Might ez well look fur a needle in a haystack ez fur him. An' ef he found me how's he ter know me now? Blame good clothes! They're ther rocinashun ov ary man. Ef I hed had me ole duds on he couldn't hev ever furgot."

He walked on for a little, in deep thought. Then the idea struck him:

"I don't want ter do it, but reckon I'll hev ter intervoo Lewis. Thar's still a center'stin' game sot up, an' me soul'll never rest easy till I know what she are. Ef I wait till I kin pull them two outen ther horsepittal, Japhet'll hev got in his big licks, an' ther fun'll be half over."

It was not so easy to decide where it was best to look for Mr. Stafford, since he was an early riser, and the hour was rather late to find him at home, but Bedrock took a cable car at the first available opportunity, and sooner than he had hoped for found himself once more on the steps of the nabob.

He rung the bell without hesitation, and there was a smile on his face as the door opened and a domestic glared at him, uncertain whether to be filled with horror or indignation.

"Mister Stafford in?" was the question, delivered in a thoroughly unabashed manner.

This was not the servant who had let him in the previous visit, so the call was a new experience.

"I don't know," she answered, inwardly quaking, and more than half tempted to slam the door in his face.

"If you could wait outside I will go and see."

"All right. Shut the door an' lock it, so ez you go tell Mister Stafford thet Bedrock ther onadulterated, is hyer, an' wants ter borry a quarter."

He lounged back, and heard the door close softly, and the bolt shoot to its place more softly still.

"An' I war hyer in my good duds, not er week ago, an' she war all smiles. Now she's all pincushions. My, my! Wot a dif'rens clothes does make in a man."

His thoughts seemed to furnish him sufficient amusement to keep him from growing impatient, for the same smile was on his face when the door opened again.

This time it was the assistant secretary who stood there, and he had none of the troubled manner of the domestic.

On the contrary he was very firm in his manner.

Instantly he thrust a revolver under the nose of the visitor, exclaiming sharply:

"You are back again, are you? It's once too often. Surrender or I will blow your worthless brains out. I'm going to march you off to the station for the assault, and if Mr. Stafford don't add a charge for something worse when he knows I have you it will be queer."

Rufe stared up languidly.

"Got a warrant, young man?"

"No, I need none. Surrender or I fire."

"Am I puppurtratin' a felony?"

"No, but you have been guilty of one, just the same."

"Thet's ter be proved. Second time ter-day a iron hez bin drawn on yer onkel, an' it b'gins ter make me tired. S'posen you shoot. Don't yer know they'd hang yer? Tain't no State's Prizzen fense ter ring a door

bell, ner yit ter ax ef ther boss are ter hum. Lewis an' me be ole pards, ez you orter know, an'—come off yer perch!"

With a swiftess the eye could not follow Bedrock seized the secretary by the wrist, and a wrench followed which caused the pistol to drop from the nerveless fingers.

It fell on the door-step, hammer down, with an exploding crash which rung through the house, and sent the startled domestic who was almost at John's shoulder shrieking back through the hall.

Bedrock was not at all startled.

He had heard too many guns go off in good earnest, and he added as coolly as though he was not with what seemed but a touch controlling the movements of the powerful man:

"Got er gun meself but I seldom use it. Ain't afared ov 'em, cornsequently. Now, you go see Lewis, an' make a open corn-feshun, an' it'll be good fur yer soul. Ef yer don't I'll use my influens' ter hev yer bounced; an' I think I kin make ther rifle."

He flung the man's hand away from him, and John darted back in haste.

Perhaps he would have sought the millionaire, and perhaps not, but all need of his doing so was removed by the appearance of the millionaire himself.

"Bedrock, the irrepressible, I declare!" was his exclamation, as he caught sight of the ragged figure in the doorway.

"Come in, man, and give an account of yourself. Never mind John, he's a little off his base. Something queer happened here last night that I want to consult you about."

And into his private den the magnate actually led the tramp, much to the astonishment of three or four quaking servants, who were eying the battered, tattered-looking desperado from a distance.

CHAPTER XVII.

MUTUAL CONFIDENCE.

"Wot's bitin' thet young man?" was Bedrock's question as he sunk down in an easy-chair, regardless of the fact that his clothing and the furniture scarcely were suited to a close acquaintance.

"Ef he hedn't b'longed hyer I'd 'a' felt in duty bound ter let him have one—straight. An' it would 'a' bin mighty apt ter bu'st his jaw."

Stafford looked at his vis-a-vis curiously.

In spite of his old-time experience with the tramp he felt as though there must be some mistake. This fellow was worth a quarter of a million, had bloomed around the city in speckless broadcloth, holding his own with the big-bugs he had met, and here, in twenty-four hours, had changed to this. It could not be possible.

The question remained unanswered, since the magnate fell into a brown study.

Was such a person to be trusted with a confidential communication?

True, he had been loyal enough in the matter of the S. B. and Q. He could have sold out his knowledge and the magnate's contract for double the money Stafford had paid for them, and it was in recognition of that fact he had let the DeLangdon of respectable life into his schemes far enough to double, or more, his tidy little capital.

But he had all along doubts whether the tramp of the mines had the wit to make all the possibilities of the case.

As, however, the linneaments of the man he had first met at Paddy's Flat came back to him, all doubt appeared to be useless, and he accepted the situation with a sigh of regret, and drew his chair up confidentially toward Bedrock.

Primrose understood the struggle going on in the mind of the gentleman, and was amused, but never lost sight of the main question; and had reasons for it. He brought Lewis back to it by a repetition, couched in somewhat different words.

"They you don't profess to know? John thinks he has a grievance on account of something which happened as you were leaving the house. As a joke it was no doubt a success, but he is inclined to consider it something more serious."

"Notter blessed thing. I waltzed outen ther house 'thout a word ter any livin' critter; an' didn't see hide ner huff ov ther young man wot kerries a gun."

"I fancied at the time there must be some

mistake, and I believe so now more firmly than ever. You would not deny in seriousness the affair if you had a hand in it."

And with this exordium Stafford told about the finding of his man all trussed up, and accusations he had made against the late visitor.

Lewis had the happy faculty of telling a story well, and Bedrock chuckled from start to finish, until at the last his face took on a serious look, and he asked:

"Honor bright, war ther ary papers taken?"

"There were, though I believe of no consequence to any one but their owners. They were chiefly memoranda and copies; though I wouldn't care to have their contents bruited abroad."

"Prezaek'ly. An' you wouldn't like ter tell me?"

"Well, you see you have such an infernal faculty for getting up to the elbow into anything you once touch with your fingers that I would just as soon not. At present I do not care to have the matters stirred up, though a time may come when I will have to make investigations."

"Blind ole boss ez I be that nod's ez good ez a wink. But yer wouldn't mind sayin' ef they hed anything ter do with a man named Grigson?"

Stafford shook his head.

"Net a fambly named Chase?"

"I do not remember that name was mentioned."

"Mou't hev bin ther name ov Taylor loomin' up on 'em?"

"See here, Bedrock, I suspect you know the name of every man, woman and child in California. If you keep on saying them over you are bound to hit it some day."

"Maybe it war, then, an' mebbe it warn't. Ye ain't quite sure er you hed let me know. Wun lass' try an' then I'll leave yer off. Prehaps you recomember secin' ther fambly ov Trainor menshuned in the list?"

"Confound you, man, I will begin to believe you know more about the papers than you have let on. Better call John in and have this thing settled."

"Let John simmer. I tole yer lass' night I war on ther trail ov fraud, willainy an' d'cepshun. Ett jest struck me ther two trails war a-goin' ter run tergether. An' ef so be thet ther dockymints war taken by a tramp thet looked like me, an' ther aforesaid Grigson had a centerest in 'em, I reckon I could guess w'o cracked ther crib, an' done John up in a bag. It war a ole side-pard ov mine, sure ernuf. Ett looks like his work, an' I know he's wu'kin' onder kiver fur a party ter ther case, though he didn't let on he was in ary thing so stiff ez bu'glary."

"And which side are you working on?"

"I wur wu'kin' fur a young lady ov maridgeable age onder ther name ov Chase, though I s'pishum' it hed orter be Trainor; but I'm kinder free-footed now. She went up ther flume lass night, ez nigh ez I kin deescover."

"Ah!"

The few words of Bedrock had apparently let a flood of light in upon the mind of the capitalist.

"Yes, it's more ov ther Paddy's Flat an' Sunken River myst'ry. I knowed ett soon ez I heered, an' I sez, Bedrock, ett's yer bounden duty ter foller ther trail. I'm on it, an' ef it runs ag'in' your centerests you got ernuf so ez it won't hurt much, wile jestice will be did."

"That will be satisfactory; and I suspect you will be more apt to bring justice out of it than if I had undertaken the task myself. How did you get an inkling of the thing? Tell me the truth, and perhaps we can work together."

So Bedrock described the little affair over at Oakland, and gave an account of the revelations made to him, confidential though they had been. He judged he knew Stafford a great deal better than did Lawrence Oldcort, and that this course was the best.

"But, bless my soul, this is going to reopen the case all around, and we will have to begin over again to find out who Alta really is, just as much as the rest of them."

"Looks like it. She'll be in ther swim."

"She is in it. Last night she received a mysterious warning, which, at first, I thought was the beginning of a blackmailing scheme, though now I begin to think it

is something more serious. Let me show it to you."

Primrose waved the subject away.

"I know. I brung it, an' in course I read it. W'ot's more, I found out arterwards w'o writ it. It war genoowine, though I can't sca'ssly make out w'y."

"You found out? Good heavens! Is there anything you couldn't find out? Let me hear about that, then."

This brought them around to the adventures of the preceding night, and Stafford listened with much interest and admiration to the story as quaintly told by the man of rags.

"So now, yer see, frum w'ot Moll let out in ther horspittal, an' w'ot I knowed meself, ther gal went up; an' that war part ov Grigson's scheme, though he war 'parently hesitatin' on a-killin' ov her. Mebbe he changed his base, all ov a sudden. Prehaps he hez found some 'un ez 'll suit better ter be a long lost orphin. Mebbe he thinks he kin take ther tricks better with old woman Chase. An' prehaps he are goin' ter fetch ther Taylors on ther stage, though w'y they come in are more ner I kin see at present."

"And meantime he thinks it a good scheme to get Alta out of the way, as being less easily recognized after she is buried. He could buy a couple of these heathen for a dollar, and no man could ever trace the crime home to him or them."

"Hello! W'ot heathen?"

"Highbinders they call them. Heathen Chinees. I have not told you yet Alta did not go to the theater, but, to see if there was anything in the warning, I sent the carriage, telling the coachman not to be surprised at anything which happened."

"An' s'uthin' did happen, ov course."

"Something I thought very singular. At a gloomy corner on the way home the driver swears some one leaped up to the door of the coach and after peering inside for a moment fired two or three shots, and then he and another ran away. From their appearance he judged they were Chinamen. What do you think of that?"

"Mebbe it war you they war a'rter," answered Bedrock musingly.

"Can't most always, sometimes tell. Looks more an' more myster'us. I might ax a ques-t'shun er two, but reckon I'd better worry out ther answers fur meself. Then I won't be borin' inter fambly secrets."

"That is a distinction without much of a difference. You expect to get there just the same. If there is any way I can help you—by the way, to do what?"

"Can't prove it yit by me. Got ter see Oldcort, find out whar Mrs. Chase went too, s'arch the rooins fur two corpses, an' perhaps look arter Pony Taylor an' his sister. Oh, I got a heap ov bizzness ter get through afore I kin tell right w'ot's on the carpet."

"And meantime you intend to drop me out of the question altogether. If the Highbinders come my way I can take care of myself."

"W'y shouldn't you? W'ot's ther use ov so many millyuns ef yer can't git along 'thout ole Bedrock. Thar's John, now. Vallyble sorter a man he be. Have him around with his gun an' you'll be safe. They'll all shoot at him."

"It appears to me you don't take much stock in John."

"Not much, an' that's a fact. He'll bear watchin'. So this hyer railroad stock w'ot yer holdin' fur Alty are w'ot Oldcort hez his eyes on. 'Cordin' ter that, Pony Taylor owns about half ov Frisco. Ef I can't be good on the one trail, w'y not take ther other? I see yer hev took ther warnin', w'ich war ther most pertic'kler thing an' I guess I better be a-goin'. I ain't got no nearder ter how Grigson means ter git at ther pile w'en he gits them girls outen the way, but that'll d'velop. That'll d'velop. Mornin', an' be riddy fur w'ot turns up."

Bedrock went out as large as life, and this time there was no chance for mistake, since Stafford accompanied him to the front door.

He had learned a good deal more than Stafford suspected, and went away quite well satisfied with his interview.

First he visited the ruins.

It was too soon to obtain certain information, for though the conflagration had been stopped before the house was altogether destroyed the upper stories had fallen in, and

as yet had not been thoroughly examined, though in some way it had got abroad that two persons had perished in the flames.

"Sorry I can't stay an' help in ther center-est in work, but I must take one more look at Missus Chase's, an' leave word thar fur Oldcort ef he turns up. Then, I reckon I'll leave Abednego ter w'uk this cend ov ther line an' go hunt fur Pony."

CHAPTER XVIII.

BEARDING THE LION.

It was not a bad idea of Bedrock's, that Oldcort would be apt to go directly to Mrs. Chase's rooms.

Indeed, it was the only likely course for him to pursue, and if the man of rags wanted to see him it was the sole way in which he could accomplish it. If Mrs. Chase had returned the rest would be plain sailing.

But, Mrs. Chase had not returned, and as far as he knew but little could result from his visit. The people of the house had heard nothing more of the widow, and so far as they could say, Lawrence Oldcort had not been seen in the neighborhood.

"Right queer, that," thought Primrose.

"Mebbe I better not be in sich a hurry 'bout leavin' town. Looks ez though s'uthin' more mou't 'a' happened ter ther young man. Singlar he should be lingerin'."

He waited some little time without seeing any signs of Lawrence, and began to be anxious. Finally, he scribbled a note and left it with the woman who had a room adjoining those occupied by the Chases when they were at home.

He gave the number of an obscure lodging-house which he had discovered, and said he could be found there between one and two that afternoon, and between six and seven that evening. Having thus taken the only means he could think of to get at Oldcort he hurried away to his dinner.

After that he waited the full hour, and no Oldcort arriving, started off to again view the tenement-house where the disaster of the preceding night had occurred.

The engines had played upon the building till every part of it standing was saturated, and men were now engaged clearing away the debris in the upper stories.

Of course there was the usual quantity of idlers, and Bedrock, strolled in among them, apparently paying no attention to their talk, but hearing all that was said.

There were a dozen theories as to how the fire started, and all of them wide of the truth.

There was some talk of a fight which had occurred when the fire was at its height, but about it the misinformation he gathered made Primrose smile. No one knew the rights of that either.

What he was interested in, however, was the question of bodies; and it did not take him long to learn that as yet none had been found.

At last, he did ask a question on the subject, of a man who looked as though any information he might give would be reliable.

"No, sir," he said positively, though not without a glance at Bedrock's rags.

"Every soul got out, though it was a close squeak for Pat McGlaughlin. He was dragged out by the hair of the head, and a minute later and he wouldn't have got away at all. You better ask him about it if there were any folks in the building that you knew."

It was not hard to find Pat.

He was reasonably sober now, and perfectly willing to tell all about his adventure.

As he did not look better than Bedrock he was as well satisfied with him for a listener as with a better-dressed man.

"Begorra! an' yez kin well say Oi had a narrow ischape. There wor me laid up wid the r'oomatics that baid Oi could niver move hand nor fut, an' Bridget off wid the childer, niver wanst thinkin' av me. Sure, an' it wor the squake av me loife."

"So they tell me, so they tell me, an' they say you war ther last man outen ther buildin'. Mebbe thar war some on ther story above. How did it go with them?"

"Sure, an' they called ther rowl this

mornin', an' all wor prisint or accounted phor. It wor good phor sore oyes ter say how neighborly they could be, an' all av 'em there savin' Moll Bartlit an' that pore ixcuse av a man she calls her hoosbahnd."

"None ov her fambly missin'?"

"Howly Mosel! Phat wor Oi thinkin' av? The choild wor a-missin' an' ther girrul phat come home wid Moll; but sure, they don't count. They'll tourn oup in the coourse av the day."

Here was some intelligence at last.

And it came most unexpectedly. Pat spoke as though he knew what he was talking about. There was a certain kindly expression in his tone which came from a certainty, and would not have been there had there been the least thought in the mind of the Irishman that the parties had perished in the blaze.

"Yer thinks so, but I've knowed folks ter keep on a-thinkin' fur a week, an' then be brought up all a-standin' with a lot ov bones. Two gals, did yer say?"

"Two av 'em, an' have I thought they wor oup there is it here Oi wad be shtandin'? Niver wanst. Oi'd be there, wid me coat off, a-diggin' loike woid, an' a wapin' me sowl away. An' wid good rayson. It wor thim ez saved Pat McGlaughlin whin all the worl'd had lift him to dole."

"How was that? How was that? I've heard a good deal ov chin but it 'pears they bin a leavin' ther most thrillin' part out."

"Thrillin's no name phor it. Thim two childer dhragg'd me out, an' it wor no lought load they had betwene thim. An' whin they had me safe they wor so scared they joost pranced aff down the shtrate, an' that's the lasht ez wor sane av thim. But they'll come round. They know where Carter's Court are. Thrust thim to foind it. Av it wor nothin' ilse the kid wad want to know phat hed became av Moll."

"An' they saw them come out, an' run away, an' never stopped 'em? Pore kids! All alone till the old 'uns git outer ther horsepittal. Ef they hed did right by 'em they'd 'a' taken 'em in, an' took keer ov 'em tell they hed a home ter go to. I'd 'a' give 'em a case meself, an' ef they turn up let me know an' I'll do it yit."

"It wor not because the naybors wor not willin', the blissin's av Mary on thim! Sure, an' it's oon charity that Bridget an' the kids are livin' this blessid minnit. Av ye choose to contrIBUTE it's meself that kin put that same case where it will do the most good."

Bedrock fumbled in his pockets in search of small change, and finally extracted a quarter.

He was morally certain Bridget and the children would receive no benefit from it, and that the nearest rum-mill would, but he was grateful for the intelligence received, and wanted to open the way to use McGlaughlin.

"I mean w'ot I say," said Primrose, as he handed over the coin to the not unwilling fingers.

"I ain't a Mackay, though, an' coin's skeerce tell I git in my rents at ther end ov ther month. But I'll allers sheer me last with the d'servin', an' ef they turn up let me know an' I'll ante up ther balance. I'll be 'long hyer ag'in ter see, or send my man."

"Ett's not very like thet Florence'll kin back hyer ef she are free-footed," thought Bedrock, as he walked away.

"Ther other one kin start her on ther way home, an' thar's whar she'd turn up ef nothin' stopped ter hinder. But she orter bin thar now. Looks ez though thar war su'thin' wrong, an' I reekon I won't go outen town jest so soon ez I thought fur. I did hope I war done with Japhet fur ther peresent, but ef thar's no news afore this evenin', I'll have ter pay a visit down around that quarter. Abednego mou't not know whar ter find me, an' I must see him aryhow afore I leave fur ther country."

He spent the day in an apparent aimless wandering, and acted the part of a tramp to such perfection that he was the richer by several gratuities which were thrust upon him by some sentimentalists who were ever ready to relieve unmeriting distress, and when the night had well advanced, and he had heard nothing further of Lawrence Oldcort, he swung into Japhet Grigson's saloon.

The night before, after Grigson had fairly come to himself, the saloon-keeper had sent the two men out on a trail, and Trinnfador had returned to report their want of success after helping Bedrock to get the Bartletts under way for the hospital.

What sort of a story he would have to tell was more than Primrose knew, but he imagined that unless Pete Parker had got in his report first, the cross-eyed man would be equal to the occasion.

Neither Abednego nor Japhet Grigson were in the room when Bedrock appeared, and the latter strolled along through the crowd, taking stock of the faces he saw, and looking for a comfortable place near to the bar.

What might happen in case he was recognized by any of the gang with whom he had been at war the previous night, did not trouble him a particle. It might make trouble between him and the proprietor in case the matter should cause a riot in the house, but for the sake of the fun he was not altogether averse to its coming.

But he found a chair without attracting any apparent attention, and had been seated over his beer for more than half an hour before he was recognized, or any of the parties for whom he was looking made their appearance.

Then, everybody arrived at once.

CHAPTER XIX.

BEDROCK STRIKES A JOB.

It might have been as well for Bedrock to have waited till he saw Abednego again before venturing into the lair of the lion.

The cross-eyed man might have put him up to an idea or two if he had chosen to speak—and the chances were that he would have done so. The friendship between the two was not more than skin deep, perhaps, yet they had vagged it together in times that were past, knew each other thoroughly, and neither would have wanted for choice a better man to tie to in any emergency.

Abednego had returned to face Grigson after the rescue of the Bartletts, and had given his side of the story after a fashion which, if it did not altogether convince, made Grigson hesitate to believe that Trinnfador would be false to his interest.

Abednego reported all four of the inmates of the room when the building was fired, as dead, and that he and his partner had rescued the bodies on general principles, and to throw any suspicious persons off the scent.

As for the fight with Pete Parker, he played innocence to perfection, swore they had only defended themselves, and that the attack had probably been made out of sheer jealousy. If there was anything more than that in the matter he had better ask his pard, who was a man from the ground up, and built to stay right where he belonged.

So the cross-eyed man was dismissed to his guard duty, and reminded that the time was not far off when he would be used in a matter that he was aware of.

During the day Bedrock did not make his appearance, and Trinnfador was taking a quiet snooze, to prepare himself for the duties of the night.

He was not recognized as one of the gang which held out at Japhet's, the relation between the two men having so far been kept a secret, and it was understood he was to make his appearance at irregular hours, and hold communication with Grigson in a furtive way.

Meantime, Japhet had not been trusting altogether in the report of the tramp, since within an hour he had found that part of it, at least, was incorrect, to speak after the very mildest fashion.

Investigation showed that at least one of the Bartletts was still alive.

It had been a close call, but once at the hospital, and such vigorous methods were taken that Moll soon aroused from the lethargy produced by the drug.

They dragged her here, and pushed her there; they dosed her with strong coffee; they gave her a shower-bath. Before Bedrock had bowed himself away from the institution she was wide enough awake to talk, though she said but little. Hank was actually breathing, and there was a possibility he would rally, though the chances were strong against his living till morning.

Japhet feit he could hardly afford to suspect Trinnfador.

He had hunted the tramp up with some difficulty, had kept him more or less entirely from that time to this, and relied on his evidence to be forthcoming at the proper time. The fellow had good meat and drink, all the beer he needed, and all the money he asked for. Why should he not be true?

If he had used him as a sort of a body-guard and private detective the work was not unpleasant, and he had agreed to pay well for it. Altogether, he was inclined to put some confidence in him.

Confidence in Bedrock was something else.

He might be the very sort of fellow Abednego would like to have behind him in the desperate work he expected to do some night, and yet not be the man Japhet should allow to get an inside view of the workings of his affairs. Yet, here he was, with his head more than half through the door at his first appearance.

He thought he would question the cross-eyed man a little more closely than he had as yet done about the antecedents of his friend; and if the answers were not perfectly satisfactory perhaps it would be already time for him to retire.

If the fellow should turn out to be a detective?

Japhet shuddered at the thought in spite of himself, and with his usual prompt attention began to lay the train, even before Trinnfador put in his appearance.

Abednego reached the saloon some little time before the coming of Bedrock.

He swaggered in after his customary style, ordered his beer, and told Jimmy to hang it up. He singled out a fellow that looked fairly prosperous for his position in life, and began an attack which seemed intended to reach his pocket, and was apparently oblivious of a certain sign which had been made to him, and which he had answered by an almost imperceptible nod of the head.

Nevertheless, he did not intend to ignore the order, and in due course sauntered out.

He knew which way to go, and how to make his way without being seen.

Grigson was waiting for him.

"Late to-night, ain't you? I've been waiting an hour. The fellow was not as dead as he seemed, though I believe he's hopped the twig since, and the woman is very much alive. If you had twisted her neck and dumped her out of the upper windows it would have been no great loss. But some men never know when they can make a strike."

If this was intended as a feeler it appeared to produce immediate results.

Abednego straightened himself up as though he scented business.

"Sorry, less, but you orter sed suthin' sooner. An' it wa'n't me ez did ther deed. Pard, he kerried 'em both out, an' when he tole me ter ketch on I jest ketched."

"Well, that same pard of yours made a nice mess of it. Blast him! He was saving the wrong persons."

"Good laws, boss, ef yer hed on'y tole him so in sich many words he'd 'a' drapped his gran'mother ef he hed ther chaince ter pick up sum coin instid. Thar's nothin' mean 'bout Bedrock. On'y fault ter find with him are he's allers a-go'in'. Bound ter git thar, sumwhar, jest so he kin keep a-movin'. Bin jest ez much fun ter him a-tossin' ther old wench outen ther winder ez kerriy'n' her down three stories, an' gittin' a dence ov a fall at ther bottom ov 'em, ter say nothin' ov w'ot Pete an' his crowd war a-sottin' up on us. Oh, he's jest solid."

"Glad to hear it, for I was afraid perhaps he was not the man we wanted. Do you think he can be trusted for a little job to-night, with a woman in the case?"

"Do I think he kin be trusted? W'y, bless yer soul, he'd sooner be trusted than ter pay ther ready cash. Did yer ever hear ov us down at Blazer's Bar, in ther good ole times w'en me an' him pulled tergether?"

"Can't say that I did, or that it would make any difference. I want you to understand that you are going bail for him. You are about as deep in the mud as any of us are in the mire, so I am not afraid of you, but if he squeaks we will take it out of you. And that means considerably more than you yet know of. There are some things about this country you haven't heard of yet, and

won't till we know just what we can depend on."

"Pard, yer knows w'o I am, an' whar ye found me. Ef yer thinks after that ez I could play yer foul yer orter lef' me thar. I warn't thinkin' ov bringin' my pard behind ther scenes, but I knowed he war a good man, an' war fetchin' him along fur you ter size up. Ef he hedn't kim you know whar you'd be now. You kin sw'ar us both in ary way yer wants, an' set us down ter ary kind of a job fur a feeler. Ef we don't pan out a full ounce ter ther rocker set Pete on us, an' tell him ter cut our throats."

If ever there was a man in earnest it seemed to be Triinfador, and so far as he was concerned Japhet was almost satisfied.

But, for Bedrock, something told him he had no use.

"That's jest it. I don't want to set Pete on you two, an' I don't care to let him know just yet that you are my men—not until I have tried your friend out, and know he will not be found wanting. If you all come together to-night there maybe trouble. I wouldn't mind Parker getting another lesson, but I don't want to lose him. I will have to try and keep you apart, for he has been swearing to-day he would be out on the war-path."

"Oh, you give pard a hint an' he'll be ready fur him. He'll jest roll him all up an' put him in a bag, an' han' him over 'thout a scratch on him. That's his way."

"No, I don't care about that, either. The thing has gone far enough if I am to use him—or you either. If you are game for it I want one of you for a job to-night, and I would rather test him, if you can guarantee he is not afraid of a little tough work. What it is you ought to be able to judge from what I have said."

"That's all right. He's game fur anything frum robbin' a cripple ter bu'stin' a skull."

"Then see him if you can and let him know I want him. Beware he does not get into a row with Pete, and bring him to me as soon as you can."

"He'll be thar er tharabouts; but lem'me remind yer thiet fur a fine job he's a middlin' high-priced man of he takes ther noshun. Better make yer barg'in fu'st."

"Never mind that. If he once does the work he will never grumble about the pay."

"Prhaps not, bein' ez he'd be in ther same boat, but all ther same, yer don't want ter crowd him, cyther. He mou't tum'mle boat an' cargo over inter ther drink. But that's your lookout, an' on'y my say-so. So long. Ef I kin clap peepers on him afore he gits ter goin' I'll save Pete Parker a heap sight of trouble."

The interview was at an end, and Abednego had given his old-time pard as good a character as he knew how. When he went out there was a twinkle in his eyes that gave them a more than ordinary squint, and a grin on his face that he could hardly conceal till the door had closed behind him.

"Ef ther boss hez it in fur him," he thought, "I reckon he's able fur him; an' ef it's a squar' deal, 'thout a flyer, he'll git all ther p'inters I kin see he's a cetchin' fur. Take it ary way they want, ef they tackle ole Bedrock he'll wake 'em up, he'll wake 'em up."

Japhet looked thoughtfully after the tramp as he slouched away.

"I never knew a man of that stamp that would shrink at anything he thought within his powers, and it may be I am losing a hand that is worth a fortune, but for all that I am afraid after to-night the gentleman called Bedrock will never grumble about the way Japhet Grigson pays his tools."

"If it was only a later stage of the game I might set him at Pete, and laugh whichever way it came out; but just now I can't risk it, I can't risk it."

CHAPTER XX.

BEDROCK FINDS A FRIEND.

THE Pete Parker who came gliding into Grigson's was an entirely different looking man from the Pete Parker Bedrock had seen the previous evening, at the head of his gang of toughs, yet Primrose knew him on the instant.

It took a good disguise to fool those lynx

eyes of his, and here and there was only a change of clothing, and some minor differences in the arrangement of his hair. They made a great change in the appearance of the man, but not enough to throw the man of rags off his guard.

"Kinder lucky," he thought, "thet ther cove are on that sorter a lay. He's on his shape, now, an' ef he wants ter hev it out he'll be apt ter give warnin'. This are a tough ole den, ov course, but even hyer they do things arter some kinder style, I sh'd allow. He'll bear watchin', but I needn't begin ter shoot 'cause he edges up my way."

He did not for a moment doubt that Pete would recognize him as one of the men with whom he had such a desperate conflict the night before, and he was pretty certain that sooner or later, in the course of the evening, Parker would try to get even.

And if he did there would be, "fun amaz-in'."

The careless glance given in his direction might or might not have included the tramp, but Pete gave no sign. There was a smile on his not unhandsome face as he ambled up to the bar, accompanied by several of his friends. A stranger would scarcely have suspected him of being the cold-blooded desperado he was.

"Evening, Jimmy," he remarked, bending over the counter and addressing the "fly"

"What has become of the boss? I have something for his ear, but he don't show up, and I'm beginning to get tired waiting."

"Evenin', Pete. Boss is sick in bed. Er that's where he's bin all day. If he gets 'round to it s'pose he'll amble this way, by and by, but he won't gush ter hear yer shoutin' his name too loud. Don't scratch yerself too hard, an' maybe he'll see you afore you want him to. He's that kind."

"What's gone wrong with you?" asked Pete, looking up suspiciously. "Have I been treading on your toes?"

"Don't know that you have, but some one has been pinching the boss's. Perhaps he'll tell you all about it. If he don't you better look a little out. That's all."

"Guess that's meant for a warning, and it's much obliged that I am, but all the same, Pete Parker can take care of himself, boss or no boss. Set over your poison, and mates and I will drink to the fellows that have two chances to talk."

Jimmy said nothing further. He saw Pete was in no humor to be lectured, and was wise enough to know that he had no business with a man like Parker if the latter started on the war-path.

As Pete was flush he paid for the liquor without demur, and then dropping his companions began to stroll around the room.

Everybody there knew him, or of him, and he did not want for friendly admirers to greet him pleasantly. He gave a nod here and a wink there, and it was some time before he had worked around to the neighborhood of Bedrock.

Then he halted and gave the tramp a cold, unrecognizing stare.

Bedrock returned the look with interest. He was not at all abashed, and there were plenty of other men in the room who were as hard looking as himself. So long as they had wealth enough to order their beer or otherwise patronize the house, they were welcomed by the proprietor, or his employees.

"Hello, fat man! what's a fellow of your style doing here? Don't it strike you this isn't exactly the regions for your lordship to be traveling in? Get up here and dance. You got to do something to pay your foot-ing and I guess there's no use to ask you to set them up for the house."

Bedrock had not been attempting any particular style so far, but had simply been quietly holding on.

Now, he took his cue in an instant.

Pete had recognized him; of that there was no doubt. This horseplay he proposed to inaugurate was but a means of leading up to an affair in which he might get revenge for the downfall at their last meeting. At the same time, he did not want to have the cause of the racket ventilated. From what he knew of the tramp he believed he would lock horns without a word.

That was the view of Primrose, and it offered him a chance to prolong the "fun," and perhaps make a few friends for his side, though he could see plainly enough that Pete was one of the worst of the bad men who hung around Japhet Grigson's.

"No, yer royal nibs, ter set 'em up fur ther house ree-quires coin, an' yer humble, bumble, overcome tumble sarvent hez jest spent his lass' duckat. An' fur dancin'—he ain't a b'ar. But ef it warter sing, now—blamme, ef yer gives me a call fur that I'll jest lift ther ruff off."

"Curse yer singing! We don't want any of your wauling here. It's a dance we want out of the fat man, and a dance we are going to have, if we have to trice you up for a supple-jack, and pull the string ourselves. Get up, there, before some one lifts you up. And if they do I'll swear it won't be any too easy."

"Ef yer grace will on'y go a leetle slow mebbe I kin convince yer. 'Deed an' double, I ain't no dancer, an' never war. But ter sing, w'y I've knowed the day when ther hull ov Boodle Bar jest went wild an' kerried me up to ther bar on the'r hands, on'y fur one song."

"It's a pity they didn't leave you there, with a hole in yer head. That nag won't trot here, and we mean it, don't we, culls?"

"That's the ticket, pard. We don't want your howling. Give us a dance."

"Tumble up or we'll jerk you up."

"Better go, quick, when Pete is floor manager and calls you out."

The crowd answered Pete's appeal with affirmations from every side, and the way the nearest men began to move up it looked as though the threat was going to be made good. If he did not get up some one would be apt to try to jerk him up.

"All right," he answered, in the same mild tone he had been using all along.

"Ett's playin' it purty low down fur Pete ter throw off on an' old side pard a'rter this fashion, but ef he kin stan' it I guess I kin. W'ot'll yer hev? Ary thing frum ther dead march ter ther Spanish cachuca are at yer service. I put ther same steps ter all ov 'em, but thar's a heap-sight in a name. But I reekon Pete, thar, 'll hev ter w'issel."

"Whistle yourself, old man. I've got enough to do to take in the fun."

"No w'issel no dance."

"Yes, but there will be. Strike up and strike lively or I will blow you cold."

Sternly sharp, came Pete's answer, and with it a shining tube came in sight.

It came in sight; but that was all.

"W'issel, dog-gun ye, w'issel!"

As he spoke Bedrock was covering his man with the neatness that was peculiar to him, and so swiftly did he finish the operation that Pete, who was watching all the time for some such move, never caught a glimpse of his game till the drop was on him.

"You ain't no blower, that I'll sw'ar to, an' ef I give yer a weenty, teenty chance, whar, oh, whar will yer Onkle Bedrock be. I got yer foul, an' it's w'issel er croak."

For fully the space of a minute Parker remained voiceless and motionless. He knew that every man near had seen him draw his revolver, and when the fat man started in on the same game he had to follow suit or throw up his cards.

If he tried to do the one he would be apt to die; if he did the other, where was his reputation as a mighty chief?

When he got up Bedrock had moved so that his flank was fairly well protected by a neighboring table, while the wall made safe his rear. The other flank and his front he was reasonably sure he could take care of, and he smiled serenely as he noted how some of Pete's friends were trying to edge up on him.

"Come, come, old man, you can't fight the house, and if I do go down how long do you think you will stay standing? Put up that barker or the boys will tramp you out."

"Pete, I tell yer bluff won't work," answered Bedrock, solemnly.

"I dunno ez I'm yearnin' ter make yer hand in yer checks, but I'm goin' ter hev that w'issel er break s'uthin', ef it's on'y yer back. An ef ye turns ther tube this way I'll pull ther trigger ov mine. Make up yer mind, fur I'm a-comin'."

With a brace of long strides Bedrock almost covered the distance between them, and Parker knew the time had arrived when something must be done.

"Flag of truce, man!" he exclaimed sharply, flinging up the other, empty hand.

"I'm not so innocent I don't know when the drop is on me, nor so green as to run many chances on what a stranger will or will not do, for what a man says down here he generally means. Give me an even show and we'll settle it any way you want, whether you are to dance or I am to whistle. If that don't suit you, drive on with your meat-wagon and see where you come out at."

"Fa'r play an' no favor?"

"Yes, fair play and no favor. I'll guarantee that. I want to know which is the best man as much as you do, and there's only one way to find out."

"'F I hed a frien' hyer that wouldn't be sich a bad offer. I ain't wonderin' 'bout yer muskle, fur I know it won't show 'longside ov mine. An' I ain't concern'd 'bout yer shootin', case I kin shoot 'round yer ev'ry day in the week. It's nerve I'd like ter put ther tester on, an' I orter hev a pard on that, so thet ef yourn failed I wouldn't go out ov ther wet alone. Anybody hyer ready ter stan' up to ther de'th fur Onkle Bedrock?"

"That's my name, cully. If you want a solid friend just tie to the Damber Cove from Daisyville."

A natty looking young man pushed his way forward through the crowd, until near the side of Primrose.

He was dressed in a loud though neatly made suit of clothes, fitting his figure to perfection, and his hands and feet, gloved and well shod, were small and shapely.

His face was not a particularly handsome one, but there was something in it which said that when he announced himself as ready to stand by the tramp it was no idle boast. And his eyes were sharp and piercing as needles.

"Now then, if you want to try his nerve sail in on the rat-catching. I am here to hold the bag."

As he took his station by the side of the man he declared he would befriend he thrust both hands in his pockets, and stared steadily at the house.

CHAPTER XXI.

LIGHTS OUT.

SOMETHING like a buzz went 'round the room, and it grew louder the further it got away from the spot where Pete Parker was having a check, temporary though it might prove to be.

At that Bedrock knew the Damber Cove from Daisyville was no stranger, and that if he was in earnest and equal to his reputation he was not as much alone there as he had thought. Two men against fifty—he had faced such odds many a time; and though it was gambling on his luck he had so far come out right side up in the long run.

Whoever he might be, the young man was a stranger to him, and Bedrock could only account for the stand taken by the innate perverseness of some bad men, who are willing to run great risks to show their dead-game. He was something of that sort himself.

"Thankee, pard. You onderstands I ain't axin' fur help with ary one man, but bein', so ter speak, a sorter stranger hyerabouts, an' not knowin' w'ich trains in Pete Parker's gang, I on'y want a looker out ter see fair play. Then, I'm able fur Jin'ral Jackson hisself."

"Fair play you'll get, cully, though I don't like to call you pard. You are not precisely my style. But when a man wants to show his grit you can spill it with a large B that it's safe betting the Damber Cove will give him a show for his white alley. The crowd here knows me, and will tell you whether I'm good to tie to."

"Oh, you are good enough to walk alone, Damber," put in Pete.

"Nobody here wants to run against the snag at the head of your saddlebar, but it strikes me it's not your put in, if you would only look at in the right light. I have never knocked a chip off of your shoulder, and I never meant to if you didn't crowd it under my nose too hard. But what's your lay out?"

We were only after fun, but it looks as though you meant the pure quill of business. As long as he has me lined you'll hardly expect me to talk very strong to you."

"Don't know that I want you to talk to me particularly, one way or another, but if you have anything much to say I guess the stranger would not object to take the bead off—though I can't say how it would make much difference. I got you lined, anyhow."

"That's right, curse you both! One man is not enough to take the straps of Pete Parker, you have to double team him. I pass my hand now, but the next time there is a deal I'll have it in to down you without all this chin."

"Double team, is it? Why, bless my soul, you have a dozen heelers here who would all chip in if they didn't know it would be the signal for you to go to kingdom come. No, no, Pete, you and I know what trouble is. You're not dead game."

"Game enough to carry my end with half a show against any sport in Frisco."

"That's just it, Peter. You want a show. And the sport that asks for that is just no sport at all. If two men had the drop on me what would I be doing?"

Bedrock was listening.

At first he was not sure but what the Damber Cove, as he had called himself, was a side pard of Pete's, who was trying to make a diversion in his favor; but as he listened he thought he knew better.

There was a half-concealed deadliness in the smoothness of their tones which convinced him there was war between these two—and that the Damber Cove was the better man.

The chances were he was taking this opportunity to throw dirt on Parker's honors as a chief; and that so far as Primrose was concerned, if the notion took him he would turn and rend him without the slightest hesitation.

Anyhow, no one was going to trouble about seeing him dance so long as the circus between these two chiefs was open, and the entertainment free. What course he was going to take in the event of a shooting match, free for all, was more than Bedrock had decided, though he rather thought he would chip in on the side of the Damber Cove in case his help seemed to be needed.

If he had been only an ordinary tramp, such as he seemed to be, he would have probably taken the opportunity to slink away, for the coast would have been reasonably clear.

But though he was not watching Pete quite as closely as he had done, he held his gun at a ready, and cast a furtive glance around to see how the crowd was acting.

In the distance he caught a glimpse of Triinfador.

The cross-eyed man had just come in, apparently, and the sight of him made Bedrock want to shrug his shoulders. Abednego had as much to fear from Pete as he had, and that would guarantee his loyalty.

Looking a little further he saw a face that was familiar, but it took a moment to place it, and then he was almost betrayed into a start.

Unless he was wildly mistaken it belonged to Lawrence Oldcourt.

Just how he recognized him it would have been hard to explain, since the young man was in disguise, and looked the thorough gutter-snipe, out of pocket, out of health, and out of food, but keeping alive on the rations of fiery whisky he managed to obtain from time to time.

"Good laws! W'ot kin he be doin' hyer," thought Bedrock, turning away his gaze, and half fearing that some one had noticed it.

"He must 'a' got on ther trail on his own back. How kin I give him ther off'us? An' w'o kin tell w'ot didoes he's goin' ter cut up afore ther night's over. It's okkard, so it is, an' I wisht he'd 'a' stayed at home, or come some other night. Wonder of he thinks ov backing this Damber Cove? Seems ter be edgin' up with some sich an ider."

There was no time, however, for Bedrock to puzzle further over the meaning of the presence there of the young man, or his intentions. Pete Parker had answered the question of the Damber Cove with a sly

growl, and was turning away when the sportive-looking sport had something to say that brought matters to a climax.

"I wouldn't, Pete, I really wouldn't. You go away and leave this unsettled and there may not be any next time for you. In fact, it would make me want to take you over my knee, and break you in two. I don't know but what I had better do it, anyhow. Run fast, if you don't want to take the risk."

The taunting tone which the young man assumed as he spoke was more than Pete could stand.

He wheeled, and without a motion toward his pistol-pocket, darted forward, his fist ready doubled, and aimed a blow at his tormentor.

"You know how to do it, Petey," laughed the other, turning the stroke aside with an easy parry, that sent Parker reeling past from the force of his own blow.

"Fists go, then, unless my friend, here, demands the first chance. But if any of your crowd thinks he can draw and shoot before I can have him down, I'd advise him to hold on. I'm watching of them all."

As yet he had not shown a weapon, but the position of his hands, in his side-pockets, had been enough to show what he was fingering, and the Damber Cove's reputation for making the secret shot was too well known for any one to take much risk. Perhaps it was this warning that checked a rush when his hands came out.

Weaponless he might appear to be, but how quick could he catch the drop again? Pete's bullies held their hands, and allowed their leader again to try to hoe his own row.

Laughing as he spoke the Damber Cove shifted carelessly away, so as to have a better chance if Pete came back on him, and apparently had eyes for no one else.

At the same time Bedrock appeared to be staring at a man who had just made his appearance behind the bar on the opposite side of the room.

The man was Japhet Grigson, but to Primrose he did not look like the individual he had met the previous evening, and he was trying to think wherein lay the difference.

With the attention of both men thus apparently occupied it appeared to be the chance in the game for a sanded deck. From out of the crowd sprung one of the Parker gang, and thrust a revolver at the back of the Damber Cove.

If he had pressed on the trigger at the right instant he would have done the work beyond chance of failure, but he lingered on it, taking an aim, and that doubly mated his play.

Without pause or consideration the Damber Cove swung his fist around taking the fellow between the eyes, while at the same time Bedrock dealt him a straight blow near the back of the neck.

The double stroke was very near to a fatal one. The force of the blow on the face would have sent him backward to the floor, while that of Primrose would have stretched him senseless on his face. The two together propped him up for an instant, while his pistol fell from his grasp. Then, his knees collapsed, and he sunk in a limp and almost lifeless heap.

"Thankee, tramp," said the Damber Cove, though without looking Bedrock's way. "Have your optics peeled, though. I reckon we'll have to fight the room, and I'll have no time to be looking after you."

"Don't menshun it, pard. I can't 'ford a capper, an' so I got in ther way ov lookin' out for meself. They're a-comin'. Ware lawd!"

Sure enough, the ruck was on them, and the two men were striking vigorously, left and right, while knives and pistols glittered in the gaslight, and bullets began to fly.

In that nest of cut-throats to cripple was a pleasure, and to kill would be no great sorrow.

Yet in the midst of all the flurry Bedrock was cool enough to note Japhet Grigson bending down behind the bar, and to suspect what it was he was doing. He gathered himself together for a rush away from the spot, and just as he was ready the lights went out.

In the darkness Bedrock lost no time. He went through the lines of the enemy

like a cyclone, striking as he went, and was passing Trinnfador when that worthy reached out his hand and caught him by the shoulder.

"Stiddy, pard. Ef yer ain't too busy ter stop you better lissen to me warble. Ther boss wants ter see yer pu'tickler, an' ef I war you I wouldn't disserp'int him."

"Blame ther boss. I ain't got time ter wait. Ef ther lights wunst goes out Bedrock goes out with 'em."

"That's all right, an' I'm goin' with yer. Yer frien', thar, hez found ther back way a'ready."

With Trinnfador leading the two hurried away, and the cross-eyed man did not seem for an instant in doubt as to his course, though he gave the point of his elbow freely, more than once.

"This way," he whispered, darting into an open doorway. "Ef we don't find ther boss reckon he'll find us, an' that'll be jest ez good."

The passage ran back from the saloon for some distance, and Primrose had begun to wonder where it led to when he heard the click of several hammers, and then the voice of Grigson exclaiming, "Who goes there?"

CHAPTER XXII.

GRIGSON'S LITTLE GAME.

"Go slow, pard!" was Abednego's swift answer.

"It's two ov the angels ez walks late fur a dark night. Reckon yer knows who it are which are a-shoutin'."

"Ah, I thought, maybe, it was that cursed Damber Cove. I've missed him again. How did he get out of it? I had it laid down fine when I turned down the lights, but he made the grand skip. Who is that with you?"

"Thet same ole pard. Pete hed it in fur him in a quiet way, an' ez we didn't want no han' in ary trouble we jest skipped, soon ez we hed ther chance."

"I don't know but what Pete is right. There has been some awful lying somewhere."

"You bet ther hez ef Pete Parker hed a chance ter reel off a story. You know me, an' that orter be ernuf fur both ov us. Ain't I a vouchin' thet he's a good man?"

"You are good enough man for some purposes. All I am afraid of is that you are too good for me. Pete swears you didn't say a word about your orders, but just sailed in and let drive. It may have been a misunderstanding, but it looks like something else."

"It war a bully missonderstandin' fur Pete. He made a mux ov things, an' ef we hed b'en right dead sure you'd 'a' wanted it we'd a sent him an' about half ov his gang to ther morgue on a shutter. But we didn't know, an' so we kinder played light."

"Mighty light it was, when you laid out some of the best men on the Coast. And as for knowing—you know altogether too much unless I am sure of you. Such wise fellows sometimes pass in their checks."

"Ef I've kim ter be a objeck ov s'pishun in me old age I ain't sure but w'ot I'd better go. Ef thet war all yer wanted ter say guess we better sherry our nibs. Ther lights hez struck up by this, an' some ov ther bad 'uns 'll be huntin' us."

"Modest you are. I have something to say to you, but you better make up your mind as to your answer before you let me. It will be unhealthy if you say no, when I want to hear yes. Your pard here has vouched for you; and if he has done so without knowing what he said it is the worse for him. I'll kill you both."

Bedrock had chipped into the conversation, and Japhet seem to turn on him with a flash of the eyes, though in the darkness position and manner could only be guessed at.

Though the boss talked as though he meant it his words did not daunt the great original.

"Thankee, boss. Ef my time hez come I'd jest ez soon it war that way ez ary other. Wouldn't like ter threaten, but s'posin' me time ain't come, whatcher think I'd be doin'?"

"Never mind that. Are you open for a job of work?"

"Cert"

Bedrock could be terse enough when he tried.

"Red work?"

"Does I look like a turkey-cock, ter be afeared ov ther color? Ett's coin I'm after."

"There will be coin enough for the size of the contract; but what will be worth more, if you are the sort of man you say you are, you will be solid with men whom it is worth while to call friends."

"Don't I know it, boss? Thar will be jest o'shuns ov coin, an' a hull milky way av beer."

"That's about the size of it. It won't be long before you shuck those rags if we once find you the right sort of a pard to put in the way of well-doing."

"Exqueeze me, boss. I kin take coin, an' I love beer; but furdur than that I don't keer to go. These hyer rags is part ov me, an' ef I shucked 'em I wouldn't be half ez good a man. Say! Is it ter be a stan'-up fight, or are it ter be a knife in ther back? I've tried 'em both, an' ett don't make much differens."

"It may be one, and it may turn out to be the other. I don't care to explain any further around here. I will take you to the spot, and give orders when we get there. Abednego can stay here and watch for the men he knows of. They may try their game of last night over again. If they do a pistol-shot won't alarm the house, and if he has a corpse to show for it the body will be paid for in more ways than one."

"Alle lighty. Bedrock are yer whang-doodle, an' ef he don't give a good ercount ov hisself you slaughter ther cross-eyed man when yer gits back."

There was a subdued chuckle in the darkness, though who gave it was hard to tell. Probably Grigson. The idea of leaving Trinnfador in pawn seemed to have an amusing side.

"This way, then, and be careful how you mention names while you are on the street. I'd clap you into some sort of a disguise if it was any sort of use, but you look like every other man we will see on the pave, and that is good enough."

It seemed as if Trinnfador had already received his orders, for Japhet moved away without further conversation, and Bedrock followed the sound of his light footsteps along the uncarpeted passage.

Soon they came to a stairway, which took them up to a narrow hall where a dim light was burning.

"It is not necessary we walk arm in arm, my friend. I will go out alone, and after a moment you can follow. Look to the right, and after that keep me in sight."

"But s'posin' I can't?"

Grigson frowned.

"You must. When I enter a house you can count a hundred slowly, and then follow without ringing the bell. You will be met in the hall, and further instructions given. There is only one more caution. Don't stain your clothes."

With this horrid suggestion on his lips Japhet passed along through the door, which he closed behind him, leaving Bedrock uncertain what was the meaning of it all.

"Reckon he hez a body," was his thought.

"Now, far ter cut a throat, ef ther boss hed ther power he wouldn't fail fur lack ov will. But some cusses that kin wade in gore up to ther chin hate ter han'le a stiff. Ett's lucky I ain't ov ther squeamish kind. An' thet same are w'ot he's a-bankin' on. An' ef I stain me duds it won't hurt 'em like ez though they was Pete Parker's."

He shrugged his shoulders and went out in the wake of Grigson.

The latter was in sight, half a block away, standing under the glare of a street lamp, and apparently debating whether he should go back to the saloon or not.

Had he not made an almost imperceptible sign even Bedrock's sharp eyes might not have recognized him. Certainly he was no longer either of the men he had seen before, and if he was not well disguised it was because, for the moment, he threw off his cover.

When he noticed that the tramp had him marked, and was approaching at his most rolling gait, Japhet started off slowly.

For a man as respectably dressed the street was not the safest in the world.

The hour was just late enough for the prowlers and the lurkers to be in their glory. Policemen were scarce, and men slouched about who looked as though they might be willing to tackle even Bedrock himself. Had they known that under the rags was carried a roll of bills 'way up in the hundreds they would have done it without hesitation.

More than one dark alley had to be passed, and from some of them came growls that made them sound like the lairs of wild beasts.

Unheeding his surroundings Japhet pursued his way, and Bedrock strode along in his rear, halting only when at last Grigson seemed to have reached the house for which he had been aiming.

It was a forbidding-looking building, and utterly dark on its front. Had it not been for a faint light which stole through an unguarded chink in a shutter on the side, Primrose would have pronounced it unoccupied. He was so much interested in taking a view of the premises he almost forgot his habitual caution.

"Thet's ther place, are it? Wonder ef he hez ther gals thar, or ef this are some other lay. Ett's takin' a heap ov reesk ter find out, but I guess we kin git thar."

And just then he caught the faint shuffle of sandaled feet behind him. Had his ears not been trained to note every sound it would have passed unnoticed.

He wheeled like light, but as he wheeled two men sprung forward, and a knife came hissing down.

The stroke was coming, and there was no time to guard against it, or to strike a blow. For the second when he realized the situation he thought he was doomed.

But once again luck saved Bedrock, when his wits had failed him.

From the opposite side of the street came the sharp bark of a pistol, and the knife failed to reach him. The fellow who had been holding the blade dropped it with a cry, and staggered back, uncovering his mate as he did so.

Before the latter could make a move Bedrock's ready fist came booming along and he was sent a yard to the rear.

With nothing else for his hands to do Primrose whipped out his pistol, but forbore to fire. The two men fled at once, and as he watched their retreating figures the tramp muttered:

"By ther Lord ov Isr'el, Japh hez set his Highbinders on me."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

THE idea flashed upon Primrose that this was a bit of treachery on the part of Grigson, and that he had been lured into this neighborhood either to destroy him, or to throw him off the trail.

"Thar's wun way ter test it," he thought, and without hesitation wheeled again, and advanced toward the house in front of which the boss had halted.

Grigson was no longer to be seen.

It might be he had dodged inside of the house, but it was just as likely he had slipped around the corner when he saw the work was to be done, and left the tramp in the hands of his thugs.

If he had done the latter it was too late to follow; but in the former case Primrose had his instructions to go by. He moved on up the steps, and tried the door.

It was locked.

"No use ter linger, fur it's a dead sell, an' ef they hev ther chainece they'll begin ter shoot. By ther way, won'ner w'o fired that shot. It come mighty handy. Tho'rt it war time ter count me chips when I see'd that knife comin' down."

He made no haste about getting away, and had leisurely walked the distance of half a block or more, slightly wondering to himself why it was that the shot had not attracted attention to the spot.

Then, some one stepped up from the gutter.

"Say, old sport, this is mighty uncomfortable promenade for men that are out with the Pete Parker crowd. I just thought something might happen to you, and got good and ready to hold straight if I saw it

was needed. What are you doing around down here?"

The speaker was the Damber Cove from Daisyville, though how he had got there, unless he had been following his trail, was a mystery to Bedrock.

"Thankee fur ther leetle wun you put in fur Bedrock, sence I must say he war a-needin' it. I warn't doin' nothin' p'utickler. When ther light went out so did I, an' I bin a-wanderin' ever sence. Ef you know a better place say ther word an' I'll go 'long."

He spoke earnestly, and the Damber Dove replied, with a laugh:

"Thanks for the offer of your company, but as I said once before, you are not exactly my sort. I'll give you a warning, though. If you were pinning your faith on Grigson don't you do it some more. He's a cold-blooded ruffian for all his smooth talk, and he'd kill you for a quarter. Or, no, he wouldn't either. He would set that Pete Parker and his gang to the doing of it."

"Guess Pete hez bin tryin' it 'bout all he's a mind to, an' it didn't show a color to ther pan. I bin foolin' with him, 'ca'se he's a right-hand man ov ther boss, but I'll do so never ag'in. So long, ef you ain't goin' my way."

"So long, and take care. You're not out of the woods yet."

They separated, and Bedrock was thinking deeply as he walked along.

He had hoped to find the place where Florence Chase was confined—for he did not doubt that Japhet had her again in his power.

As Grigson had disappeared there was no use of thinking to follow him there for this night at least, and he was beginning to curse the luck which had embroiled him with Pete Parker's crowd, and so lost him the advantages he had expected to reap from Abednego's connection with the moving spirit in the plot he was endeavoring to unravel.

Just what position the cross-eyed man really held was more than he could decide.

Trinnfador was a good deal like himself in many respects, and in the times of old was not a professional lawbreaker, beyond a terrible readiness with pistols and fists. It was evident that his relations with Grigson had been kept a secret, and it looked as though the latter, having slightly mistaken his man, was in the first place using him as a guard, as Trinnfador had said, with an idea of having him available for some of his darker work later on.

It seemed strange a man like Japhet would be mistaken in his intended tool, but then, Trinnfador would or could deceive Satan himself if he had an object in view.

Did he have such an object, and if so, what was it?

Bedrock vowed he would have an answer to the question, and if it seemed necessary they could pool their issues.

"An' ez fur Oldcort, strikes me he's in a heap ov danger ef he's ez squar' a man ez I think. I'd better go 'long back an' see ef he don't need some 'un ter see him through ther ripple. An' w'ile I'm thar p'raps I kin pick up some infurmashun about ther Damber Cove. He may be a cut-throat an' a boss-thief, but he's a mighty good man ter have fur a side pard."

He had not forgotten the burglary—if burglary there was—at Lewis Stafford's, and intended to find out whether Abednego had a hand in it; but somehow he did not suspect him as strongly as he had done when talking with the railroad magnate. If he had only been there to observe how the knots were tied, he would have known better whether to blame it on John Esmer, whom he so strongly suspected of being false to his employer.

After his experience in the saloon, and the treachery of Japhet, it might appear strange Bedrock would so soon risk himself in the neighborhood.

But the man of rags had a sovereign contempt for all personal danger, and between the direct objects he had in view, and the side issue of "oceans of fun," he did not hesitate a moment, but when the idea had once taken possession of him, turned his steps in that direction.

It struck him, also, that if he could pick up a Mongolian or two on the way, he would not waste the opportunity.

There were other places of resort which

one might have thought offered some attraction, but he passed them by without a pause, even though down in Marble Hall he heard the racket of dance and music suddenly cease, and the racket of a row begin.

He reached the stairway just in time.

There was some kind of a row there also.

As he bent over and looked downward he could hear the sounds of a struggle, and a cry as of one in alarm.

Near the door was a group that had in its center a single figure, which was being pulled this way and that.

He recognized the form, and, in spite of the fact that the whole thing appeared to his experienced eyes more horse-play than anything else, was just about to spring down the stairway to take a hand in when the form broke away, there were several straight blows of surprising vigor to come from the apparently hunger-smitten gutter-snipe, who then came bounding up, the whole angered gang in hot pursuit.

"Ef that are Oldcort thar's a right smart sprinklin' ov a chauce ez he'll fall among thieves. He warn't thar 'thout it's meanin' s'uthin', an' ez thar's nothin' else on ther carpet jest now, maybe I'd better pull foot an' find out w'ot it war."

With such thoughts in his head, Bedrock went trailing along behind the rush, ready to dash up in case the young man was overtaken.

For a little the sprinting was quite lively, but the tramp trotted along with an ease that was shown by but few in the cry, and gradually passed the lot, the most of them dropping off before they had gone a square. In the end he was left alone on the trail.

For some occult reason he dodged into a doorway in time to escape the gaze of Lawrence as he looked around, and for the same mysterious cause followed carefully, waiting to see whither the young man was going.

To his surprise Oldcort led the way directly toward the house in front of which he had such a narrow escape from the Mongolians.

More than that, without the least hesitation he produced a key which fitted in the lock, and turning back the bolt entered the building, closing the door behind him.

To say Bedrock was surprised is to put it mildly. He could hardly believe the evidence of his senses.

"Ef he hedn't hed a key, now, I might er thort he war on ther lay, an' knowed more ner I did. But it looks mighty much, Rufus, ez though you hed bin fooled on yer man. Ef so, w'y so? Le'ss go see."

He followed up the steps, his feet falling as lightly as though they belonged to a cat, and tried the door with all the confidence of a resident.

It yielded to his touch, and he slipped into the hall, closing the door without the least noise. He remembered the room where he had seen the glimmering light, and thought he could guess at its location. Toward it he attempted to turn his footsteps—and met with success.

Up the stairs he softly went, and then a pencil of light from a keyhole fell upon the opposite wall of the hall.

To try this one was a more ticklish operation, but he hesitated no more than he did at the front door. With a quick though careful effort he turned the knob and gently pushed the door open for perhaps an inch.

Fortunately, as it seemed, he could command a view of the most important side of the room.

There was a bed there, and on it lay a man, neatly trussed up, and with a bandage over his mouth to stop off all possible outcry.

Over him was bending another man, a lamp in his hand, and in the latter Primrose recognized the gutter-snipe of the saloon.

"W'ot's he up to now?" thought the tramp.

"This begins ter grow interestin'. W'o's he got hyer? Le'mme see."

With his eye to the crack of the door he craned forward, and finally, through a movement of the lamp which brought the flame to bear more fully upon it, obtained a view of the face of the man on the bed.

"Whew! Ef it ain't ther Damber Cove

may I never suck aiggs ag'in. He done me a good turn not a bit ago an' I reckon thar's some mistake hyer. Ett's time ter put my say-so in an' find out w'ot's ther wrinkle."

Straightning himself up he swung the door open, and stood revealed on the threshold, at the same time saying:

"How long's this bin goin' on? I'm a solid frien' ter both ov yer, an' I can't go back on the Damber. Le'ss hear w'ot he's got ter say."

Oldcort gave one glance at the man who thus appeared, framed in the doorway, and was satisfied. He dashed down the light, and turning, fled.

There was a second door which communicated with an adjoining room, and through that he made his exit. Before Bedrock could recover from his surprise he heard his feet clattering along the hall, and down the stairway. After that came the slam of the front door, and the house was in silence.

The lamp was a brass affair, and did not break. Instead of taking after the runaway Bedrock struck a match, and lighted the wick.

"Now then, Damber, reekon you know arter w'ot you done fur me I'm a-standin' by yer. Jest tell a feller ther meanin' ov this an' I'll be yourn serenely."

He cast off the gag and cut the cords without ceremony, and the result was a revelation.

The Damber Cove sprang to his feet with as hearty a curse as the tramp had ever heard uttered, and struck out as hard as he could let go.

Burdened as he was with the lamp Bedrock could only guard; and when half a dozen rapid blows had been struck without connecting, the man leaped in for a close.

"Oh!" he gritted, as he came.

"If they had only left me a jack-knife I would carve your heart out. Curse you! I'll even up for this night's work if it takes me to the swing."

Bedrock stared at him unwinkingly, and as he came within reach, without the movement of a muscle in his face, kicked out at the nearest knee.

He hit the shin, and brought the dead-game man to terms. He leaped back, holding his leg, glared around as if in search of a weapon, and then fled, almost in the wake of Lawrence Oldcort.

"Blame ef I onderstand it," muttered Bedrock, with a rueful grin on his countenance.

"Reekon third time are ther charm—er kin it be thar are two Richmonds in ther field? After ther way he stood by me ther Damber orter knowed I war his solid frien'. 'Stid ov that he waltzed inter me like a wile-cat. Thar's s'uthin' turrible wrong 'bout this house, an' I better be gittin' out, though it mou't pay ter watch it in case Oldcort kims back."

But he did not go at once.

With the cool audacity natural to him he made some investigations before he went, and the result only puzzled him the more. There was but the one room furnished, and it had all the look of a deserted tenement. He even watched outside for a long time, but no one came. Then, with a new idea in his head he turned away.

CHAPTER XXIV.

UNWELCOME VISITORS.

ALTA BAINBRIDGE was the most important factor in the household of Lewis Stafford.

It is true they had not known each other long, but that fact counted for nothing. He had found her after some little time and trouble, and had obtained tolerably conclusive proof that she was the daughter of a dead sister, and the heiress to quite a little fortune left behind him some years before by her father when he died.

It was a question as to the ownership of certain railroad bonds that first set the magnate on the trail, and in his quest he had been signally aided by Uncle Bedrock. The adventures the two met with have been recorded elsewhere, and it is not necessary to more than hint at them.

The father of Alta had not always lived

altogether in accordance with the dictates of the law of the land, neither had his partner, and the result was the two had exchanged names, and Bainbridge, at the time of his death, was known as Trainor.

Afterward the original Trainor posed as the father of Alta, who had been brought up in the East by an aunt.

Stafford came just in time to prevent his getting possession of the fortune belonging to his supposed daughter. When the detectives who were after him, had identified him as Captain Columbo, the well-known and highly-distinguished outlaw, and taken him away to the reward reserved for such men, Alta returned to Frisco with her uncle. In the few months which had elapsed she had apparently become securely settled in place and fortune, besides endearing herself wonderfully to her bachelor uncle.

The reception of the anonymous note which she had shown him did not at first give her any particular uneasiness.

She knew that men who occupied such a position as he did, as well as the members of their families, were the recognized game of all sorts of blackmailers, and the like. Very sensibly she turned the matter over to Lewis Stafford, and then expected to think no more about it, unless it was again brought to her notice. There was nothing in her past she cared to conceal, and it would be strange if a man of millions could not look after her personal safety.

The adventure of John Esmer had been studiously kept from her ears, and it was only by chance she found out the next day something in regard to the attack on the carriage.

That seemed to be a more serious matter.

She had lived long enough in the delectable burg known as Paddy's Flat to know what can be done with a revolver, and to understand that even in a city a person was not safe from a determined assassin.

The way she came to find out about it was happening to note a couple holes in the lining of the carriage. They had been temporarily mended but her young eyes were too quick not to note that they were not a day old, and if she had not been anxious at once to know how they came there she would not have been a true woman.

The coachman was reticent at first; but how could he resist Alta?

A few questions, a little urging, and he had told her all about it, in spite of the caution of Stafford.

Of course he swore her in to secrecy, but he knew what that would count for, and that sooner or later it would be found out he had betrayed his trust.

From what he said she was sure an attempt had been made on the life of her uncle, and woman-like, her thought was to go and warn him to be careful of himself.

That would never do, however, and second thoughts told her Lewis Stafford knew the value of his own life as well as she did, and would only smile at any cautions of hers.

"There was a plot, then," she mused.

"It was against him, and probably that warning would never have been sent if some one had not feared an innocent girl might suffer.

"But how was it known that we were to attend the theater? It looks as though there must be a traitor in the household—and even then I do not know who could have been aware of our intention. I must be cautious, and to-morrow will try and worm out of uncle if he has any suspicions."

Reasoning in this way it was not hard to think she was not an intended victim at all, and when she ran out for an evening walk, she had not a thought of danger. Her sojourn in the mining regions had made her over bold when she came to the apparent safety of the city, and she would have laughed if any one had told her she was doing an imprudent thing.

Under ordinary circumstances she might have been right enough, but just now there were dangers that at best it would have been hard enough to shun.

The night grew darker, and Alta did not return; and unfortunately in that big house her absence was not noted.

Stafford had begged off from the theater on some grounds or another, and had gone off on business from which he did not re-

turn till a late hour, and then seeing nothing of his niece never gave her a second thought.

She had probably retired long ago.

So it happened that the thugs and abductors had a long twelve hours' start, since other events were destined to occur in the Stafford mansion that night which drew attention from her. If she was thought of it was with the hope she would sleep on until morning before the news must be broken to her.

It was well past midnight and Stafford was sleeping soundly.

He had a reasonably clear conscience, and the faculty of driving all thoughts of his business away when he went to bed.

He knew a man must have rest—pure and unbroken, to stand the strain of a life so full of business as the one he was leading, and he got it. An ordinary noise did not affect him, and Alta might have sung under his window for an hour without causing him to open his eyes.

But something out of the natural order of things was a different matter.

The slightest of sounds that was made at his window that night came to him like a bugle call, and in an instant his eyes were wide open, even if he was a little bewildered by the suddenness of his awakening.

The room was dark save for the dim light which struggled in through the lightly-curtained windows, but a pair of figures were limned at the opening against the pure sky beyond. If he had been as prompt for action as Bedrock would have been under the circumstances he would have had an elegant opportunity for a pot-shot which would have brought down the pair.

The forty-four calibers of Primrose would have sent a ball through and through two bodies.

Stafford had a revolver under his pillow, but for a moment he lay there not certain but what the scene was a segment of a vision which would float away if he made a movement.

It seemed more than ever like a nightmare when the figures dropped into the room, gliding toward his bed, while in the hand of one of them he caught a faint glimmer of steel.

Yet, if it was a reality the season for delay was passing. By an effort he called:

"Who is there?"

Then, the spell broke, his hand darted under his pillow in search of his revolver.

It was not there.

The suspicion of treachery in the household came to him as it had done to Alta not so many hours previously. The weapon had been there when he retired, and that it had been removed he was as well assured as though he had seen it done.

There was no more hesitation now. The magnate was bold as a lion when in his right mind, and this last was all that was needed to bring him to the full possession of his senses.

He was out of bed in an instant, and so quietly did he move that the approaching assailants had no idea of what had happened under the concealing shadows.

Stafford's clothing was close at hand, and he found it readily in the dark, but he had no idea of dressing. In the hip pocket of his pantaloons was a double derringer on which he knew he could rely. At least, had been there when he retired.

To find a pocket in a tumbled mass of clothing when one is in a hurry, and there is no light by which to tell right side from left, is not the easiest thing in the world. He fumbled hastily, and meantime the midnight marauders were coming closer.

As his hand grasped the butt of his weapon they flung themselves upon the bed.

No doubt the result was a surprise and a shock. There was a muttered curse of vexation, and a hasty examination in a jargon of some kind. Whether it was pidgin english or flash was more than he knew, for his acquaintance with the dialects was not extensive, and he was too much interested in the matter of his own safety to observe closely.

At all events, there was an answer to it which was as sudden as it proved surprising. The gas-light was suddenly lit by the electric attachment, revealing Stafford, derringer in hand, on one side of the bed, and two ruffians, dressed after the fashion of the Chinese, and

each holding a long knife, on the other. But there was something more.

Under the gas-light stood John Esmer, his hand just coming away from the electric button. His face was masked, but Stafford recognized him all the same, and throwing up his hand took a snap-shot at the traitor, while at the same time the villains with the knives bounded across the bed and launched themselves upon the railroad magnate.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FIGHT TO THE FINISH.

It would have seemed most natural for Stafford to first pay attention to the nearest danger, and Esmer made the mistake of his life when he put on that mask. Without it Lewis would have been sure he was coming to the rescue.

There was barely time for another shot, and that without more than a trilling attempt at aim.

That it was not altogether wasted was attested by the wincing of one of the fellows, but it could not have been more than a touch, else the heavy bullet would have brought him down. The rush was never checked.

Unfortunately, Stafford was cornered. The men were between him and both door and window, and had the advantage of being in motion. There was no room in which to wield a chair, and the only weapon at his command was the empty derringer. He clubbed this and determined to sell his life, if need be, as dearly as possible.

There was a likelihood the shots would call some of the domestics to the rescue, but would they come in time, and if they did what could they do?

He struck once, twice, savagely, guarding with his left arm as well as he could against the first stroke that was aimed at his breast.

A feeling as though a red-hot iron had seared his shoulder told him he was hit, but he felt the butt of his pistol crash against the forehead of one of the men and gamely turned toward the other.

He was a little previous.

The fellow he struck came again, and had his gripe on his throat before he had reached the other.

He thought no more of offense. As well as he could he tossed his arms this way and that to ward off the strokes they were raining upon him.

His arms were cut and hacked, though he knew it not. They seemed to him to be his only buckler, and it was alone the thrusts which reached his body that he felt.

If he had found time to think at all he would have believed hours were passed in the unequal struggle, but he was beyond thought, and even outcry. Like a wolf in a trap he fought without outcry, and was silently receiving his death. He staggered, dropped his arms, and suddenly pitched to the floor, almost dragging one of the men with him.

They had been every whit as silent as himself.

Probably they had not anticipated any such resistance, but they never wavered in their cruel purpose. When he collapsed, one of them bent over him, his knife upraised to give the finishing stroke.

Very cold-blooded they must have been, and full of a wicked courage, since they took no note of some cries of alarm which began to arise in the further parts of the house, followed by the distant sounds of hurrying feet.

They even failed to note some one standing at the top of the ladder which had been raised by them to the open window, and peering curiously into the room.

Had it not been for the bedstead, which partially masked their position, and rendered it impossible to see from the window with positiveness, there would have been a case or two of sudden death before this.

Uncle Bedrock could shoot as straight as the best of them, and he it was who halted a moment to make sure his presence was needed.

"W'ot in ther name ov synergogues are goin' on hyer? Looks surspishus ter find a ladder 'round this time in ther night; an' ef me ears don't 'ceive me thar's suthin' goin' on behindt ther bedpost. Hyer goes!"

With a sudden resolution he sprung into the room, revolver in hand.

The movement unmasked the tableau, and after that hesitation was at a discount. His hand flew up and he pulled the trigger.

The act was all that saved Stafford the *coup-de-grace*. The knife was even descending when the bullet struck the hand that was wielding the blade.

The steel clanged to the floor, and the man reeled away, while at the crack the other fellow suddenly dropped, making of the bed a barricade. Simultaneously, the door flew open and three or four men rushed into the room.

The assassins were ready to leave without saying good-by. As Primrose lunged forward they dodged around the foot of the bed and bolted for the window, and unfortunately Bedrock collided with the newcomers.

The three flung themselves upon him at once and if they had been of the kind who use weapons by instinct he would have been snuffed out before he had the opportunity to think he had placed himself in a position that was suspicious, to say the least.

Fortunately, the first effort was to take him alive, and with three on one it was no wonder the size of the contract did not seem as large as it really was.

As they grasped him he simply shook them off, and raised his arm to fire again, taking quick aim at the figures which were at the window by this.

If he had shaken a little harder his aim might have been truer. The three came back at him a trifle before the weapon exploded, and the bullet went wild.

That was the last of the assassins in the room. Wounded they might be, but they rolled out of the window without much regard to what was beneath them, and it was a wonder of the world two necks were not broken, then and there.

Bedrock was disgusted, but not at all alarmed—for himself, at least.

He knew it would be unwise to use pistols with these men, who were doing their duty according to their light, and he was just as well assured they would never listen to reason so long as there was a chance for them to be on fighting terms. Meanwhile Lew Stafford lay behind the bed, it might be dying, and if the ruffians had escaped it was high time something was done for him.

He dropped away his revolver to its case, despite their efforts to hold his hand, and then, stretching out both arms, gathered the three up in a grasp which seemed worse than a bear's, and swinging them clear of the floor went down with them in a heap, he on top.

"Thar, dog-gun ye!" he exclaimed, arranging them as though they were children, and holding them as easily.

"I'm hyer ter take keer ov ther boss, an' I'm mighty much afear'd thet he's got his gruel. Ef you want ther men ez hez bin playin' Hades hyer after ther new version, they went outen ther winder. Ef yer keers ter look arter them I'll let yer up. Ef yer don't I'll pound ther stuffin' outen yer, an' some sense in, an' Lewis kin put in ther time a-dyin'. What do yer say? You hear me a-shoutin'?"

As he punctuated his sentences with certain savage chugs, which sent the men back as often as they attempted to rise, he got them so far cowed that they were willing to listen to reason.

A few more hastily-spoken words appeared to convince them there was more here than they understood, and that Bedrock might not be as bad a man as he looked. A temporary truce was patched up, and the tramp philosopher arose and hurried to the side of the prostrate millionaire.

There was no motion there, and at first he thought there was no life.

The gas was burning brightly and steadily, and he could see blood everywhere. It was on the floor, it had spouted on the bed; there was a great splotch on the wall, flung there by the man who had caught Bedrock's bullet.

And in the middle of the largest pool, which was rapidly broadening, lay Stafford.

Primrose raised him carefully, and laid him on the bed.

"Hyar, you!" he shouted.

"One ov yer light out fur ther nearest

doctor, an' another 'phone fur ther best one in ther city. Ther other kin foller ther trail tell he strikes a cop, an' gives him a pointer. Ef ther boss ain't dead it's so nigh to it thar's no fun. Reckon thar's ernuf more a-comin' ter get what'll be wanted hyer tell ther saw-bones hez arrove."

He issued his orders sharply, and like one who meant to be obeyed. He started the three men flying, for they were men of sense, who thought it was best to first save the master of the house, if possible, and satisfy their curiosity afterward.

Meanwhile Bedrock took hold of the case for temporary purposes, and did as much for the wounded man as the average surgeon could have done. The sheets furnished bandages, and he was seldom without a flask of liquor in his pocket.

Other domestics came, and did what they could, but it seemed terribly long till the surgeons arrived. Of course, Primrose had perfect faith in his skirts being cleared of anything like suspicion, but he began to see it might save a great deal of trouble if Stafford came to himself long enough to recognize him.

He was too busy to trouble himself about John Esmer's body, which he discovered after he had paid some attention to the magnate. By his direction it was taken out of the room, and laid away for the inspection of the police when they should arrive. No one thought to cut the mask which covered his face, and Bedrock alone suspected his identity.

The surgeons—two of them—looked serious when they viewed the unconscious man; and very curious when they inspected Bedrock.

"Formerly a surgeon, I suppose?" asked the elder of the two, as he noted the work the tramp had done.

"Formerly 'most everythin'. A feller thet hez put ez many holes in his feller mortals ez I hev orter know how ter plug 'em—an' I guess I do. But it ain't my trade, an' I tho't it war a good thing ter shift ther 'sponsibility. Kin yer save him?"

"We can try," said the surgeon gravely; "but he looks more dead than alive. If his system rallies from the shock we will know better whether there is the reserve of vital energy to carry him through."

"Ef he kims to fur ernuf ter allow, you might say ter him thet his frien' got hyer a shade late, but he done his level best, an' may callag'in ter-morrow. So-long! Don't think I hed better be waitin'. Ther p'leese are sich blamed fools I hate ter meet 'em."

Without waiting for answer Primrose stalked out of the room, and fortunately was able to avoid the gentlemen he was not at all anxious to interview.

And the morning papers were blazing with headlines when they came out, and from one end of the city to another the newsboys were calling out the death of the railroad king, selling by the thousand the sheets which give an account of the assassination.

Yet he was not precisely dead when these papers went to press, and somehow, Bedrock was in doubt whether he was going to die.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ABEDNEGO GOES SLUMMING.

JAPHET was a man of many parts. Were it not that for years he had been identified with the criminal classes, and engaged in operations from the consequences of which he could never feel altogether safe, he might have been known on the world of change by this time, and have begun to flourish in more legitimate business.

But in his younger days he had embarked on the sea of vice, and though he was planning to obtain what might in the end prove to be a million he was in a deadly current from which he saw no way to escape.

With this wealth added to his other possessions he might realize and go somewhere else to live in a gorgeous retirement, but he recognized that the day for public usefulness had long since gone past.

It is true he had large holdings of valuable property, and was taking risks which another man might have hesitated at, but he did not feel for a moment secure, and was now playing with a more than ordinary reckless-

ness, seeking to win the stake of his life, or lose everything.

He was a man who always read the papers, but the morning after the affair at the house of Lewis Stafford he perused them with more than ordinary interest, and it was the printed matter under the flaring headlines which held his sole attention.

"Dead, is he? That will put a stop to the investigations in my direction. What a fool he was to begin them, or to show his hand, till he was ready to strike so that it would count. With another week to go on, and a witness or two who knew something worth the paying for, and it might have thrown a cloud on the titles of yours truly. Japhet generally gets all he can, and knows how to hold on to what he gets—even if it does take a little red work to do it.

"There can be no mistake about this; I only wish I was as sure about the infernal tramp. The boys may have left him dead; but, where is the body? Curse them! They may have thought they did the work, but such men are hard to kill, and he had the nerve of a pile-driver. If he had only been on the square I could have given him about all he would be likely to ask for, and used him well. If the infernal cross-eyed man don't get away from me I think I have all the threads of the affair safely in my hand. When night comes it will be best to arrange them.

"Strange, though, there is no mention of the absence of the millionaire's niece. Can it be she has not been missed; or, is there something back of it? I have her safe enough, but is there any one on the trail?"

He dropped the paper he had been reading and gave a start. A slight sound in the hall reached his ears, and it acted on him as though he heard the tramp of a battalion of armed men. He might not be a coward, but his hand actually shook as he caught at the pistol which lay handy to his grasp, and stole to the door to listen.

The noise was not repeated, and after a little he undid the fastenings, opened the door, and gave a long look in the hall.

Then, shrugging his shoulders, with a grim smile he made everything again secure, and returned to his chair.

"It is time I was getting out of this," he thought.

"When a little noise like that can upset me I must be losing my grip, and the sooner I get out of business the better.

"But is it any wonder? The devils only know enough to strike, and they don't care how or when. No hand seems to be able to catch them, and when they mark a victim there is no escape. How did they get on to me? Curses on them! If I could have guessed I would have steered wide enough of the scheme. My men have been as lucky as they, but it's dog eat dog, and their dog seems to be the bigger. A month more of this danger and suspense would kill me. I—I wonder how my victims feel?"

True enough. Japhet was haunted by a foe he feared more than the hounds of the law. They had his secret but there was no danger it would be given to the world. Instead, they preferred to deal with him after their own way. Only his own naturally excessive caution, and a bit of luck now and then, had so far saved him. But a night or two before he had been all but strangled in his own lair.

Had it not been for the coming of Abednego and his friend they would have finished their work beyond question.

The cross-eyed man had given straight goods when he told Primrose what was his duty; and his office was no sinecure.

Perhaps he understood its responsibilities better than did Grigson himself. The latter had reason to believe he was a marked victim of the secret clan which strikes where it wishes, and kills when it strikes. They had done more than all the detectives who had ever been on his trail when they solved the mystery of the leading spirit of certain crimes, and they would hunt him to the death unless he found some way to baffle them. At present he was giving them a good fight, but in the end it was flight on which he depended.

By daylight he did not fear them so much, and by night he was always on his guard, though he had already had evidence how

much that counted for. The crossed eyes of Abednego were worth more than his own regular ones. It was when he was moving where none of his henchmen could watch him that he feared danger most.

The day went around quietly enough. Abednego had no doubt been snoozing in his kennel, wherever it might be, and nothing had been heard of Bedrock. In some mysterious way the name of the latter had been kept out of the papers, and in his place figured a certain Horace DeLangdon, who had appeared and disappeared mysteriously, and of whom the reporters seemed to have failed to get a description.

If they had only known it, Primrose was as much surprised as they were, and was almost tempted to give the thing away for the sake of the sensation. On second thought he scratched his head and said nothing. It seemed to him there might be wheels within wheels, and that either he was a suspected man, whom they were trying to throw off of guard, or else there was some one working to screen his part in the affray.

He would have been willing enough to accept all possible credit had it not been for Grigson.

When he thought of him he was content. He did not know that Japhet half believed him dead, or he would have been more obliged than ever for the fortune which was temporarily screening him.

When evening came Bedrock did not show up at the saloon, but Trinnfador was there promptly on time. He entered after his usual free and easy manner, and Grigson, watching him from a peep-hole behind the bar, decided that if Primrose was still missing it was not affecting the spirits of Abednego a particle.

"It will be safe to trust him," he thought.

"So his own bread and beer are safe he is not troubling himself about his partner's. And to night I may need him."

A signal and an answer passed between the fly one and the tramp, and the latter disappeared from the room, to reappear in the passage through which Japhet had led Bedrock.

"On hand, are you?" asked the former as Abednego halted in front of him. With a pistol in his side pocket he was covering the tramp to provide against contingencies, though he expected no outbreak.

"I will want you to-night. I am going out, and I do not care to walk alone."

"Ahem!" grunted Trinnfador.

"Pard and you took a walk lass' night, an' ter-day he's a-missin'."

"Guess your pard will turn up before the evening is over. I suspect he has retired to put his nerves in soak. But I want nothing of you but to stay with me, and you can walk behind if you think it is safer. You have your weapons handy?"

"Allers. Fists fu'st off, an' guns ready ter be drawn. I'm with yer. In course I war on'y foolin'."

"I thought, perhaps, that it was a hint. Leave such things alone. I never take them as a jest; and with me business is a serious thing."

"B'lieve yer, me boy. Ef I hedn't been a witness ter a certain contract I'd opine it war seriouser. Sail on!"

"Wait a moment or two till I get under cover. It will not take me long, for it is not likely my disguise will have to stand any very close inspection."

The man who slipped out of the house and then went striding away down the street was as much unlike the Japhet Grigson known to his customers as could be, and it would have taken a sharp eye to recognize him.

Abednego had no trouble about it, though, and kept along in his wake much as Uncle Bedrock had done, though he was rather more on his guard. No assassin could have come up in his rear unnoticed, and he was ready for an attack from every casual passer they met.

At length Japhet paused in front of a building, and allowed Trinnfador to come up to him.

"Follow me," he whispered.

"You will have a little waiting to do, and I shall feel safer if you are on the inside."

Abednego nodded, and watching Grigson go up the shaky steps that led to the front door, which seemed to open in front of him of its own accord.

At that Grigson halted, and for a reason. Right in front of him a man appeared.

"You, is it, Damber?" he asked, his hand still holding the gun it had dropped to.

"Yes, it's me, and I'd have been around at your place long ago to put you on your guard if it had not been for a cursed cop. He's looking for something, he don't know what, and I was afraid he would run me in."

"Are you drunk now, or were you half seas over last night? The way you played it on Pete made me think there was something wrong then, and perhaps it's the same old trouble now."

"Curses on it, I never saw Pete last night. I tell you a fly cop came to the ranch, and took me in as I didn't think any one man could do. He had a pard, but he didn't count in the racket. They tied me up, and the infernal fraud rigged himself out in my best duds, and went out on the wayout. I don't know what he was doing, but after awhile he came back dressed like a tramp, and turned me loose. I tried him a whirl but I couldn't reach him and cut stick. But they were after me again and I have been laying low. A fellow may be a dead-game sport, but the sight of the rope will make him flinch anyhow."

"Who was he?"

Grigson asked the question thoughtfully. He remembered where he had left Bedrock the previous night, and had his suspicions.

"Blamed if I know, but he was a fly cop, and the nerviest kind of a one at that."

"Perhaps I know, and may put you in the way to get even. Any one in the room?"

"Tim and Neddy. They have their fixings on, and act as though they were told off for business. You looking for them?"

"That's all right. I'll attend to them. This is a friend of mine. Take him down and look after him till I come back. I have a party to see."

"Two or three of them, I guess," growled the Damber Cove, eying sharply the tramp who had sidled up to the doorway.

Without another word the three slipped into the hall, and the door closed behind them.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MAD AS THEY MAKE THEM.

ABEDNEGO knew that he was being led further into the secrets of Japhet than he had heretofore been admitted. What was the meaning of it he did not exactly know, nor did he greatly care. He was as much of a fatalist as Bedrock, but without the balance the latter had derived from his early education.

The room spoken of seemed to be well in the rear of the building, and arranged with a view to preventing outsiders from knowing anything going on within.

It was a long, low, dingy affair, with the windows boarded up from top to bottom in a way that suggested it was well-shuttered on the outside.

The furniture was simple, consisting of a few broad benches, which might serve as couches on a pinch, two or three rough tables, and a few chairs.

The ceilings were well-smoked, and the floor attested that those who used it were not yet members of the anti-tabacco association.

To the rear there was a door which was heavily bolted, and on either side of this door were closets, one of which was open, disclosing what looked to be the remnants of a cold lunch of prodigious dimensions.

On the benches two men were lying, dozing. At the noise made by the new-comers they started up in a confused way, and at first seemed uncertain whether it was best to remain or fly.

"Steady, boys, it's all right," said Grigson, sharply as he noted their fright.

Abednego looked curiously at the pair.

While lying down they had simply seemed to be two rough-looking men half insensible with bad whisky.

Now they were on their feet, if he had not known better he would have said they were a pair of as villainous looking Chinamen as it had ever been his luck to see.

Low, beetling brows they had, pudgy, almond eyes, and as the hat of one of them

had dropped off in his haste his cue had dropped out, and unrolled itself down along his back.

Yet, if he had pronounced them the genuine article he would have been more widely mistaken than he generally allowed himself to be.

No Celestials were these, though the imitation was simply perfect.

"On hand, I see," continued Grigson. "Still, it would have been as well if you had changed your clothes till you knew they were wanted. It might not be healthy if you were seen in them, and the truth came out."

"Blame the clothes!" was the surly answer from the nearest of the two.

"If we had anything else you bet we would have hauled them off. But it was a neat squeeze as it was, and we didn't want to be caught out late at night with a brace of bundles, and Tim such a hand as he has. It was all I could do to keep him from going to a sawbones. He says he knows it will have to come off yet."

"Oh, that will all come right. An extra hundred will plaster up a worse one, and if it don't we'll make it more. So you were hit, were you?"

"Naw, blast it! Run a snag in me wrist tell it come out on ther other side. See?"

"That is all right. You won't suffer for it."

"Naw. But I am a-sufferin' now. See?"

Grigson gave a nervous laugh, and put his hand in his pocket.

"About how hard, Tim?"

"About a century fur ez I've gone; dunno what it 'll be later on."

Japhet winced at the closing remark, but otherwise gave no sign as he counted out five twenty-dollar bills and placed them in the uninjured hand that was outstretched to receive them.

Then, he turned to Neddy.

"I guess you are not suffering more than half as bad. This, of course is extra pay for the sake of good fellowship. You have had a pretty penny already, and when the rest of the job is done you will get all that was agreed on—and more."

"Here is a friend of mine. He is safe enough, but you don't want to let your tongues waggle too much. Keep him here till I get back, and treat him white. He may be in the next business with you—and I may have need of him to-night."

Trinnfador, who did not appear to be looking at anything in particular, or paying the least attention to what was being said, nodded to the introduction, and held out his hand to Neddy. Leaving him in this attitude Grigson glided out of the room.

He moved along the hall with the noiseless and assured step of a cat in the dark, and soon found the door for which he was looking.

It opened on a cellarway, and so shaky were the stairs that if he had not been well acquainted with the place the chances were he would have broken his neck.

At the bottom of them, however, he lit a dark-lantern, and picked his way cautiously across the floor, among the litter which covered it.

It would have taken a wonderfully shrewd fellow to discover the passageway that he uncovered. It was hidden with a view to deceiving the most vigilant of explorers, and he was careful to leave everything in place behind him.

After that, he had but little further to go. A stoutly built though narrow door in the side of the passage opened into a cell, and flashing the light around he saw a woman crouched in one corner.

She looked up at him as he entered, but there was no gleam of recognition in her cold, gray eyes, which simply greeted him with a vacant stare.

"Curses on the hag!" he muttered.

"She is as mad as ever. There seems no hope for it. The longer she stays alone here the worse she will get, and it wouldn't help matters much to send in one of the boys to keep her company. If Moll had not flinched when I offered her the job I might have made the rifle. Lum can be trusted, and is good as far as he goes, but he is not a woman."

He looked at her thoughtfully for a little, and she returned his stare with interest. If

there was any recognition there was nothing to show it.

"Maud!" he called softly, at length.

Her head raised up a trifle at that, but her lips uttered no sound.

"Do you not recognize me, Maud?"

Somewhat to his surprise her lips opened at last.

"Yes, I know you. You are the Snake."

"To hear you say that even is better than to see you sit there as though you were a living corpse. You remember me of old, and you call me by a name that James Trainor once called me. But it is a mistake. I am no snake, but a true friend if you will allow me to be such. Can you not tell me something for the sake of old times? Compose yourself, and listen."

He talked to her as though she was a child, and his words seemed to have some effect. She straightened herself up, but before he could continue she mumbled:

"James Trainor? Who was he?"

"James Chase, if that will suit you better. You know who I mean. The man whose friend I was, through thick and thin."

"Ah, yes. He is dead now; did you kill him?"

"A pretty question for you to ask when his death cost me thousands. Unless I can find the deeds that he was fool enough to leave unrecorded I will be robbed of the savings of a lifetime. Where have you hidden them? I know you had them once."

"Ha, ha! That is telling. Let me out of this, and give me back my child. Then, perhaps, I may tell you. Hiders are finders, you know."

"Curse you, yes! I believed you had hidden them, and you made the mistake of a lifetime when you told the truth for once. I'll have the secret out of you if I have to cut you and your daughter into strips, piece by piece. Will you never listen to reason? Remember, this will be your last chance. I can wait no longer. Will you speak, or must I bring in the branding irons and the knife?"

"Ha, ha! Bring them in. Bring Florence, too. I want to see her once more before I die, just to tell her how we—how I—fooled the Snake."

Was it an unfortunate slip of the tongue, or did she say more than she really meant?

"By the Lord! I believe I will bring them all together. Between them I can find out what they know, and then they can all go out of the damp at once. With them removed, and Lewis Stafford dead, I can hold what I have in spite of the devil, and who will there be to stand between me and the rest of the million? As for these tools of mine, a thousand to each, and the threats and fears of the gallows, will keep them quiet till it is too late of harm. I could do without the cross-eyed man just now, but the Damber Cove can keep him in play till I can take him away. I wish I was certain it would not be best to carry him away in a sack."

So ran his thoughts, but without a word he backed out of the prison cell, closed the door carefully behind him, and hurried along the passage, through the cellar.

As he went he was still thinking:

"Moll may have to be silenced, for with Hank dead there will be nothing to hold her tongue."

"As for the girl—any other girl will do as well if I have to put up an heir to rake the bottom of the pot. I'll never saddle myself with the charming widow, that is sure. She hated me of old, to begin with, and now she's mad as the maddest to boot. The knives of the Highbinders will be good enough for her."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LUM.

In the apparently deserted house, which was the headquarters of what the reader has no doubt long ere this recognized as a desperate gang, under the leadership of Grigson, there was a factotum seldom seen, but thoroughly trusted in spite of his wild look, and wilder manner.

It was the man whom Japhet called Lum.

Just who he was, or where he came from, no one save "the boss" was supposed to know; he never told.

He had put his hand sufficiently far into certain dark deeds to make his loyalty a cer-

tainty, though he was suspected of having a conscience which, between times, troubled him.

When there was no one else to do it he attended to the "ken," and was a useful man for errands when those within did not care to venture out, even by the secret way to the rear. When summoned he came, but for the rest of the time he had a lair some where in the upper part of the old building.

It was an open secret that Japhet owned the house, though it stood upon the tax list under another name, and that Lum was this man. As such he probably received a great deal more respect than he would have done on his own merits. Left to the tender mercies of the lambs who rendezvoused at this fold and he would have had a hard time of it.

A few minutes after Japhet had left the woman in the cell below the crafty schemer came gliding up the stairway, and at his heels followed Tim and Neddy.

The man with the broken hand was in no fit condition for hard work, but this thing which Grigson contemplated was not likely to present many difficulties, and a savage face, and a fierce curse or two, would count for as much as brute force.

With his lantern Japhet cast a little halo of light ahead of him, and in that, as he reached the head of the stairway, he could see a human figure, stretched at full length on the floor, in front of a door.

"Is that you, Lum?" he cautiously whispered.

"Lum it is," came back the answer, in the same low tone.

"A minute, if you please. The mice in there have been speaking, and it was fun to listen. It even strikes me they have begun to gnaw. I was thinking that when they got done talking I would go in and see."

"And you have not been in to-day?"

"No orders, so I let them sweat. If they had broken things I might have gone in with a whip, for I could hear."

"Must be hungry by this time; and I shouldn't wonder if they were about dying for a drink. That is the way to have them when you want them to talk. Where is the key?"

"Here it is."

Lum fumbled in his pocket and produced a key, but meantime kept his ear down close to the crack under the door. If there was a word said within he seemed to want to hear it.

"Just a minute, please, just a minute. They are talking about dying now, and I want to hear the last wills and testaments."

But guarded though his tones might be there were sharp ears on the other side, and the low murmur of voices beyond suddenly ceased.

"It's too late, now, dog-gone it!" he muttered, slowly rising.

"That little cuss is a holy terror, but the other one don't seem to amount to much. What are you going to do with them?"

"The other one has had three or four days the more training. She was pert enough when she first came into the net. And then she had a run for an hour or so, and that broke her up. If I keep them down below for a week they will both be tame enough. I'll see first whether they are likely to warble. If not we may as well save good bread and meat."

"Better choke the little one, and be done with it. She's no good."

"Perhaps; but we'll see. I had no use for her, and she just stuck her own neck in the noose. If I could see the way to it I would sooner turn her loose; but I suppose she will have to go with the other one, whatever road she travels."

Listening for an instant to see if he could locate his prisoners, or if there was any danger of a rush, Grigson cautiously opened the door, casting the light from his dark lantern into the room.

The two girls were there.

At the sound of the key in the lock they had risen, Florence half timid, and Cissy altogether defiant. What dangers were now to confront them they did not know, and could not see, but they were ready to face them.

As the door opened Cissy had touched her companion lightly, and whispered:

"Don't holler tell yer hev to. It won't be

a bit of use. Ef it would they wouldn't 'a' given us ther chance. You keep cool, an' let me bluff 'em."

There was little chance for bluffing, however. Then and there Grigson had nothing to say to his captives, save the order, given in a stern tone.

"No nonsense, now. Come right along without noise or it will be the worse for you. If you don't want to walk you will be carried, and you can scream as much as you have a mind to."

"But where are you taking us?" asked Florence, anxiously.

There was no answer to the question. Japhet simply turned to his henchmen.

"Bring them along, quietly if you can, forcibly if you must."

Tim and Neddy stepped forward into the glare of the light, and though it only partially revealed their figures Florence shrunk back with a shudder, though keeping a close guard on her lips. She took them for what they appeared to be.

"All right, old man," Cissy spoke up.

"We are coming. I'd sooner walk a mile ner have one ov them things kerry me down stairs. Jest step out, an' you'll see how quick we'll foller. Reckon we can't git to a worse place than this, an' we may git to a better."

"Heaven, yes!" sighed Lum, softly, and rubbing his long bony hands together.

The words called Grigson's attention in that direction and he thrust the lantern into his hands.

"You won't be satisfied unless you are doing something; carry that."

Without trouble from the captives, the procession went lightly down the stairs, and along the same route Japhet had lately followed, halting at length in front of the underground cell in which Mrs. Chase was caged.

The door was opened, the light of the lantern turned into the room; and then, mother and daughter flew together, while Cissy, astonished in spite of herself, stood near the door, watching the meeting with something like a tear struggling in her eye.

She was thinking of her own mother—not a very good one, perhaps, but all the one she had had.

"Stay there and soak a little," growled Grigson.

"Perhaps that will bring the old hag to reason. If it don't I'll know the reason why. Now, for the balance of the menagerie. When we get the animals all together it will be time enough to mark them out for slaughter."

Lum thrust out his right hand, the fingers of which he worked suggestively, at the time holding the lantern so that the light revealed the motions.

Japhet knew what he meant if the others did not. There had been secrets shared by the two in the past, and they understood each other in the present.

"Not yet, Lum; not quite yet. Other things first. After that you can take your innocent amusement. Come along with us."

He closed the door and locked it, taking the key with him. Behind them they left all things as securely concealed as they had found them.

From the stout cage up-stairs to the cell underground the house was full of secrets. Japhet knew all of them, the men some of them, Lum the most of them. Once more Grigson started out to look over his collection, and this time he showed that the resources of the menagerie were more extensive than might have been supposed. In the hallway, near to the foot of the stairs, he touched a spring that was hidden in the wall, and gave a tug at a rude cleat, which seemed designed for an innocent hat-rack.

A panel in the wall came open, showing a passage to the next house.

As he swung his lantern up, however, he caught sight of a moving figure, flitting rapidly along a narrow hall, and almost at the same time received a blow which sent him tumbling back!

The stroke was a stout one, but, fortunately for him, he had ducked his head as it came, and it landed high up.

"At him with your knives!" he shouted, feeling with one hand for a weapon, while with the other he flashed the lantern full on his assailant.

In the halo appeared the ruddy visage of Bedrock, who was glaring straight forward, trying to pierce the darkness beyond the bull's-eye, while he held his revolver ready for business.

He was a fair mark at the moment for their own weapons, but at the instant a confused medley of sounds arose in the direction of the den, loud voices, and the cracking of a pistol.

With a sudden bound Lum sprung forward and swung the door shut, while Grigson exclaimed: "It is the infernal cross-eyed man. He and the Damber Cove must have locked horns."

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN THE NAME OF THE LAW.

If ever there was a surprised man it was Bedrock, when he stalked away from Stafford's without molestation.

He acknowledged the fact that he was in general a lucky man; but it was with a proviso.

He seldom came out of a scrape without what to other men would have seemed much tribulation, and a good deal of hard fighting to boot! He was fully expecting to have an interview with the police, and as he went along the street looked back over his shoulder, to make sure they were not on his trail.

But somehow, for once, he was not called on for an explanation; and he was not even likely to be held for a witness. Of course, he knew that if the millionaire survived, his presence and subsequent attentions would not be misconstrued; but it was not so certain the man of money would pull through.

"Ready Rank, now, was hurt twice ez bad, an' I toted him all ther way back ter Min'ral Bar, ter pull him through at lass'. But it wa'n't no great shakes ter ennybody but me an' Lew whether he lived er died. Fack are, it'd bin money in some folks' pocket ef he'd gone up ther flame. But Lew are diff'rent mater'al, it'd make a heap-sight of diff'ren's, an' I shouldn't wonder ef he went. That's ther way Peroviden's wu'ks."

Having settled this in his own mind, his next thought was whether he could not obtain some clue to the assassins.

While he had no doubt as to whose hand was behind the stroke it might not be easy to produce proof sufficient to make a jury of his own way of thinking. If the fellows could be traced to their lair it might throw some light on the subject, even if they were not captured.

One of them was marked for certain, and that might furnish a clue. For once Uncle Bedrock felt like communicating with the police, and consideration for his own comfort alone kept him from doing so. With what he could tell them he believed the detectives could run the assassins down — always provided they believed him. For fear they would not he preferred to keep the case to himself till there were further developments.

He knew the men dropped down the ladder by which both they and he had made an entrance, and if he only dared to make inquiries it seemed to him that some one could be found in the neighborhood who had observed their flight.

He considered the matter a little, and under the glare of the next lamp examined the pavement with a quick though searching glance.

He had hit it "the first clatter."

A few drops of something he knew to be blood sparkled in the light.

They made a trail which led him out on the crossing a few feet, and then stopped.

"Blame my high-heeled ole topknot ef they hev'n't took a hack!" was his exclamation, as he looked up and down the street.

"Mou't send a 'nonyous 'pistle fur ter hev 'em look fur it, an' see whar it went to, but I reckon I ain't ther time. Guess I may'zwell save meself up fur to-morrow night. Ef I don't keep mighty shady tell then I may git in ther tanks meself, an' then, who would ther be ter follow Japhet?"

And with this conclusion of the whole matter he wended his way to his lodgings. From which he did not emerge until the next evening had come down upon the city; and it was just about that hour when he received a visitor.

He had read the papers, and knew that his name or the one he was at present figuring under, did not appear in them, but he had not forgotten he had given his address to two persons, and at the first he was slightly astonished when a visitor who was neither of the two came seeking for him.

"Well, I swear, ef it ain't Moll! Thort you war in ther horspital! How did yer drap ter me palashul residence?"

"Hank is better and I left the place for a time to look for my girl. I haven't been much of a mother to her, but I didn't forget her for all that. Pat McGlaughlin told me about a man who had come inquiring after her, and I know who it must be, and thought I would try the address left with him."

"For on't yer got inter ther right shop. Now, w'ot kin Onkle Bedrock do for you?"

"It is about Cissy, my little girl. As long as Hank lives I am not one who can go to the police, and no one knows it better than Japhet Grigson. He has hold of her, I feel sure, and I want you to help me get her away from him."

"W'ot ther thunder are he doin' with her?"

"She was in company with a girl who escaped from him—a girl he wanted to help him in a scheme to make money, though I scarcely understand how."

"He wanted me to take care of her and some one else he was holding prisoner, but I plead off, for I couldn't leave Hank. Then he wanted to kill me, I guess, because I knew his secret, or enough of it to furnish a clew. The power was not all on his side. You know something of what happened the other night?"

"I sh'd so opine."

"Then, if you are the man you once were, I think you would want to know more. You are not on Grigson's trail for nothing. I can give you the pointers I have picked up, and you can give me Cissy."

"Ail right. Where is she? You hit me right whar I live, an' ef yer pint ther place I'll place ther p'inter, ef I hev ter slug a dozen, er shoot two er three. When thar's fun on board, Bedrock are all'ers around."

"I thought so; and if you have the nerve of the man who lined the Red Duke you are going to win. I daren't trust you with the number, but I'll lead you to it. After that we will do the work together."

"Ef I war sure you knowed!" Bedrock said, reflectively.

"I hed allowed ter git onter Grigson ter-night, an' trail him down; but this hyer seems ter be better than good. He's a cove thet's up to ther dodges, an' smart ez a bar-trap. He mou't throw me off, an' by to-morrer it'd be too late. I'm with yer, Moll, ef yer swars ter me on Hank's life thet yer on ther squar'."

"I swear it on that, and the bones of my mother. I mean all I say. I'll take you straight to the place I believe she is, and you can wait till you see the boss go in if you don't want to risk it before."

So it was that Moll went away first, but Bedrock followed her after a little, joining her when they got so far away from the house that their meeting would not be noticed by any one there.

It was still too early to make any attempt, and they managed to kill time after a fashion that would have thrown dust in the eyes of any one watching them. Then, with unerring precision, Moll guided her champion to the house which Grigson had entered a few minutes before.

She, however, approached by the rear, and waited at a few yards' distance while Primrose advanced to reconnoiter.

He understood he was in a dangerous neighborhood, and that the approaches to this apparently ramshackelly old building were probably better guarded than they seemed, and when he came to the rear door he was only made the more certain. He believed a little caution would not be out of place, even in him, and so crept through the dilapidated fence which separated the narrow yard from the next building.

As he did so the question struck him, what under heavens was the use of that fence, if it was not for a blind?

"Betcher dollar ther two ruffs are onder one man, an' ther fu'st letter ov his name are Japhet. Le'ss see ef I caint make a strike

through ther 'shanty to ther palace. It's a leetle bit ov a place, but I wouldn't wonder ef it war mighty important."

He had no present use for Moll, and did not think it worth while to go back to tell her of his conclusions. He advanced to the smaller house, considered ways and means for a little, and then tumbled in through a broken window which was only partially boarded up. He had decided that from the roof of this building it was possible to enter an upper window of the adjoining house, though he was not sure that before that he would not find something worth the investigating.

So it came he stumbled by chance upon the room in which a prisoner was confined, and setting to work to open the way for freedom, he had recognized the niece of the millionaire, who barely had time to emerge through the unlocked and unbolted door, and flit along the hall, when the panel in the wall opened, and Grigson and his men appeared on the stage.

What immediately followed the reader has already learned.

With the closing of the panel Bedrock sprung away in the wake of the fleeing girl, overtook her, and guided her out of the house without any reference to the anxiety of Moll, who was waiting in the rear, and had heard distinctly the noise of a fray.

"Land sakes!" he grunted as he hurried her along the street, his hand on the revolver under his rags. "W'ot yer doin' thar?"

"I hardly know myself," was the composed answer.

"I was taken there. That is about all I can say. It's a safe guess that I was under the influence of a drug the most of the time, from the influence of which I have—fortunately—just awakened. I recognized you at the first sound of your voice, and thought, Here comes my good angel again. Is the danger over?"

"A healthy ole angel I be, miss; but I reckon Gabriel hisself wouldn't hev bin much more welcome. Ez fur ez I kin see, hev'n' both han's free, an' reasonably fair tools ter fill 'em with, ef thar's danger afoot it'll perobably be fur ther other side. I wisht I could escort yer hum—whar yer wants ter go slow when yer arrove, ez Lewis hez bin in a diffikilty, an' are lyin' at ther pint ov death. But I hev a hull basket ov fun on han's, ter say nothin' ov bizzness. I'll git yer outen this hyer sink-hole, an' put yer in a hack fur ther Stafford manshun. Then I'll hev ter go back. I left a woman waitin' fur me—yer ain't seen nothin' ov ary other lam's, hez yer?"

Alta had seen nothing of anybody, as she declared, and though she would have been glad of the continued protection of even the wretched old vagabond Primrose looked to be, she accepted the situation.

As they went along he told her of the affair of the previous evening, and how he had providentially discovered the situation while prowling around Stafford's without any very definite idea of what he was after.

Finally, he saw her into a hack, the number of which he carefully took, and as it started off, turned his face, to set it once more in the direction of the headquarters of Grigson's gang.

The action brought him fronting a man who had followed the pair for some little distance, and who had him covered, while two other men were hurrying up from the rear.

"There is no use to make trouble. Perhaps you are all right, and maybe you are all wrong. We have been hunting for a man of your size all day. I arrest you for the murder of a man named John Esmer, and for an attempt on the life of Lewis Stafford."

CHAPTER XXX.

TWO RICHMONDS IN THE FIELD.

"Jest in ther hour ov me triumph!" muttered Bedrock, as he fell back a pace, while he regarded the man in front of him closely.

This was one of the times he did not think it advisable to attempt to catch the drop from a man who held it; but before he surrendered he wanted to make sure the supposed detective was the genuine article.

He was as good a judge of men as anybody living, and what he saw convinced him beyond a doubt; yet he stood out for the safe side.

"Easy, me noble lord! Mebbe you are w'ot yer repersents, an' prehabs you ain't. Go a leetle slow with that barkin' iron, an' lis'sen ter reason yerself. I'll take a promernard with yer ter ther nighest bobby we kin strike, an' ef he sez so I'll go 'long with yer, submittin' ter 'carrerrashun fur purposes ov investigashun w'ich will bring out ther c'arackter ov Bedrock fair ez ther sun, cl'ar ez ther moon, an' terrybul ez a army with banners. Ef that don't suit yer, crack yer whip!"

"That will suit us well enough, especially as you can't possibly get away. Come along."

In the midst of the three, Uncle Bedrock moved away.

At the next corner he was assured it was all right, and without another murmur suffered himself to be piloted to prison. It was too late to trouble himself about explanation, and he thought he had probably slept in worse quarters.

As the door opened to admit him to a cell he saw, by the light in the corridor, that the little room already had one occupant, and a still closer gaze revealed to him the features of the Damber Cove!

"Hello, Damber, ole man, are that you?" he asked, as the door closed behind him.

"Curse you, let up on that, you hound of a detective! Do you think I don't know you? If you have come here to work the handle of the pump you are away off. I'll never leak, and if you bore me too much I'll strangle you where you stand."

Bedrock pursed up his lips.

The reception he had met with when he had unbound this fellow might have been a mistake; but this time he talked as though he was in dead earnest, and Primrose fancied he saw something behind it all that he had not previously thought of. He went to one of the bunks, and seating himself on the side of it began to whistle in a subdued tone.

When Japhet called on Tim and Neddy to assist him he left Trinnfador behind, with the Damber Cove to watch him.

He said nothing of the kind, but the dead-game man understood him, and apparently intended to execute his task after the most approved fashion. He watched the face of the cross-eyed man narrowly, saying but little, and that not after a fashion to invite confidence, or a continuance of the conversation.

The cross-eyed man did not appear to be troubled by the coldness of his companion.

He stared around the room, after an abstracted fashion, and seemed to be interested in a dingy picture which hung beyond but to the right of the shoulders of the Damber Cove.

It was probably the portrait of some defunct prize-fighter. Toward it he turned his steps.

Then, when he was just within fair reaching distance, he flung himself upon the Damber without a word of warning—and was met after the same fashion. Trinnfador had been watching all the time, and saw that the struggle was to come.

Neither man wanted to draw a weapon, and they fought it out silently as far as they could, save for the savage snarl which nature teaches the wild beast, and which comes just as natural to the unregenerate man.

Abednego was the larger man by far, and was no mean proficient in the art of wrestling; but he knew when he closed that he had no small contract on hand. The reputation of the Damber Cove for being dead-game was well enough known to him, and he had heard and seen enough to be sure he was as good as his reputation.

Whatever the Damber Cove might think he said nothing. He made a quick catch for the under hold, and when that failed caught as he could, and exerted a strength that was far greater than Trinnfador had expected. He had thought he was getting the benefit of a surprise, but it really was the other way.

But after a little, superior weight began to tell. Slowly the Damber Cove was forced back, his footing seemingly growing more and more insecure, though he struggled grandly to reverse the advantage. Abednego was getting the upper hand, and both men knew it. At last, with a quick jerk, the latter flung the fellow to the floor and

followed him with his full weight, landing on his breast.

It was not quite as bad as if a mountain had fallen; but for the time being it knocked the breath out as effectually. Planting a knee on either shoulder Trinnfador gazed down into the face of the fallen man, and scratched his head reflectively. Now that he had him he hardly knew what to do with him.

There was no telling how soon Japhet would come back, and this was not a very good position to be found in.

Something in the face of the man riveted his attention, however, and reaching down he caught hold of the end of the trim mustache.

He tugged gently but persistently, and finally it came off in his fingers, revealing what seemed to be the face of an entirely different man!

"Hum! That's suthin' else. Better look a leetle fuder. Ef thar ain't a wrinkle hyer, thet we ain't bin gittin' on to, call me a Dutchman."

Carefully holding the wrists together in case the Damber recovered his senses enough for an attempt at business, Abednego began to explore his pockets.

And the first thing he came upon was a pair of handcuffs.

A queer look came over his face at that, and he searched no further. Instead, he pulled a flask from his pocket and began to work at restoring the man to his senses.

They were coming back fast enough, and when he had taken a swallow he looked as though he was ready to begin over again.

"Easy, my frien'. I gott er glimmerin' s'pishun ov who yer be, an' it won't hurt yer ter own up to ther fact. You ain't ther Damber Cove—w'o be ye?"

"If you mean me square let me up and I'll open out. If you are a side pard of old Bedrock I ought not to have much to fear."

"Up she goes! Now, say yer say-so. Bedrock an' me be workin' on ther same level."

"Then, there ought to be no trouble between you and me. The old man is my father, and he is a better man than he looks. My name is Rufus Primrose, and I am working up a case in favor of a man named Oldcort. Do you know anything about it?"

"Can't say ez I do, but ef I knowed more ov w'o he is I mou't say suthin' else."

"It relates to a young lady by the name of Chase, and a fortune in the distance. If you have anything to say it will be worth money."

"Chase, eh? That's my name. W'ot I got ter say 'll keep tell we git elsewhar. What sorter a rifle are yer tryin' ter work now?"

"I want to go through this house. I got in by a fluke, and found those two fellows here. I couldn't do anything with them here, for fear of arousing their suspicions. I had almost decided to go out for help when Japhet came. Are you with me, or are you going to try to block my game? Speak quick. I have my breath now, and we can try it over again."

"I'm with yer," began Abednego, who was rather out of breath himself from the frankness of his companion.

And then, there was a noise of tramping feet, and the sound like the smothered voice of a woman. Before the two could make up their minds what it meant, the door flew open and Pete Parker with several of his gang rushed in, dragging with them Moll Bartlett.

"Knife the infernal spy!" exclaimed one of the men, at the same time drawing a wicked blade.

"Go slow, there!" interposed Pete.

"Dead women tell no tales; but a muss on the floor may. This is better."

His gripe was on her throat, and the fingers seemed to be eating into her windpipe. Already Moll began to hang limply from his hand. She was still weak from the terrible ordeal of poison, fire and anxiety. It would not take much more of such work to shut off forever the sluggishly flowing current of her life.

It was time some one acted, and there was one man there who was not afraid, though the odds might be ever so great against him.

"Hold on, there, Pete. Drop that or I'll drop you!"

It was Rufus Primrose, the younger, who was talking.

The voice had more effect than the threat. Pete's grasp relaxed as he wheeled toward the speaker.

"The Damber Cove, by all that's lucky! You've had it in for me; now's the time to have it out. Down him, boys!"

As he turned he saw, or thought he saw, that the attention of the two men standing there was altogether centered on himself, and that they did not note two of the gang who had been creeping up upon their flank. His fellows were all ready for the intruders, and it needed but a single stroke.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE REAL THING.

IN another part of the city, and some short time before the events just described were transpiring, there was another little drama going on, though it was apparently played with an openness and a bravado which asked for no closed doors, and underground apartments.

The Highbinders of San Francisco have their place in history, and the record says their deeds were all evil.

Whether as blackmailers, avengers, or hired assassins, they have stopped at nothing, and apparently almost unchallenged have worked their wicked will.

To the Caucasian eye one Chinaman looks like another, and identification was almost impossible unless assisted by some Mongolian who was not to be scared by the almost certainty of future retribution.

Their murders were almost exclusively confined to their own race; but there their knives were apt to pick out a shining mark, and the wealthiest of the merchants had to think twice before he mortally affronted one of his race who could compass the retention of a hired assassin.

This evening a Chinaman who evidently belonged to the better class was hurrying along a crowded street with the peculiar gliding movement which belongs to the Celestial when in haste.

One hand was hidden under his blouse, and his almond eyes were peering from this side to that, as though he was in trembling anticipation of some unwelcome sight.

It is not always the unexpected that happens, though one who knew nothing of the dread clans, and looked along the crowded thoroughfare would have thought that here if anywhere was safety from the stroke of the bravo.

Right at the corner formed with a cross street, two streams of belated home-goers mingled or crossed, and under the street-light stood a stalwart policeman.

Toward him the Chinaman veered, and halting almost at his side looked downward at the watch he had drawn from a pocket. In the other hand he held a small package, carefully done up in paper.

He gave the short nod one is apt to give on finding a tryst has been promptly kept, and looked up and down the street, as though expecting, yet half fearing, to see some one who should be there.

At that moment a man who was half bent double, and whose face was strangely disguised by a couple of painted strokes extending downward from the outside corners of his eyes, was crossing the street.

At the gutter he left the crossing, darted behind the street lamp and the policeman, plunged a knife into the back of the loiterer, snatched the package from his opening hand, and darted away, before anyone in the neighborhood had an inkling of what had happened.

When he had gone a half a dozen steps or so he came upon another of the same sort, looking as much like him as one pea like another, who turned and fled with him.

Before the two had gone half a block no one, even if he had been trying to keep his eyes on the two from first to last, could possibly have told which one of them it was who dealt the stroke.

Nevertheless, it seemed that the juncture of forces was a mistake, after all.

If two men had been hurrying from the spot in different directions it might have

distracted attention, caused delay, and allowed both to escape.

But two together made a mark more easily kept in view; and besides that, they attracted the attention of a small boy, a flock away, who had seen a sudden commotion in the distant crowd, where more were anxious to catch a glimpse of the fallen man than to pursue the assassin.

What had happened the small boy could not tell, but he saw two Chinamen coming from the spot; and they were coming in haste. Innocent, or not, of wrong doing, the young hoodlum knew there would be little difficulty involving them in trouble if they were only kept there long enough for trouble to reach them.

Without a second thought of any possible consequences to himself he flung himself right forward under their feet, as they were darting around the corner.

An instant later and the three would have been screened from observation. As it was, the policeman, who had just straightened up from a hasty observation of the fallen man, saw the trouble in the distance, and only taking time to give a sharp rap for assistance dashed off after the game in sight.

After him came a dozen followers. The boy was yelling at the top of his voice while he hung on to a leg of a Celestial like grim death. It looked as though a capture might be made; and in the grim humor of that crowd a capture meant something else.

A whisper had gone around that the Highbinders had again got in their work; and with a savage snarl the crowd broke away in pursuit, with a wolfish resolve to get in theirs.

The struggle on the corner lasted for only an instant.

A fall that would have knocked the breath out of any one else scarcely discomposed the man from the East.

He tried to scramble up; and then noticed the clog which had attached itself to his leg.

He tried to shake it off; but it hung there like a barnacle to a hulk.

From his breast he drew a long knife, and raising it in the air stooped over the youth, while a cry of horror arose from the coming crowd.

At that he seemed to recognize what it was which had fastened to him. Even at the risk of capture he forbore to strike. Instead, he took the time to seize the little wrists in a gripe of iron, and wrenched them apart. Then, with what but seemed moderate haste, he bounded away in the wake of his comrade in crime.

In gratitude for the escape which, to the mob, seemed almost miraculous, the young hoodlum grabbed a loose brick, and joined in the pursuit, which had momentarily slackened at the sight of his danger.

The crowd was gathering numbers as it went, and became more unwieldy. The fugitives gave up all thought of escaping observation, and taking to the middle of the street broke into a desperate run.

Behind them rose the cries:

"Murder!"

"Stop them!"

"Murder!"

At first the two had the advantage of the semi-darkness, and the ignorance of those whom they met. Before any of these thought to stop them they were gone.

This could not last forever.

The shouts began to be more distinctly wafted ahead, and men on the streets through which the chase rolled began to look for what was coming. Sooner or later it looked as though the hunters must reach the hunted.

The policeman who had headed the chase in the start had dropped back into the ruck, but there was a solid company now in the lead, with a front of a score of files.

Still the two ran on without ever looking behind, though stones and other missiles began to fly, and now and then there was the crack of a pistol as some one recklessly took a snap shot at the flitting figures, now maintaining a lead of scarce a dozen yards.

Apparently they were losing ground at last, and a tigerish yell arose as they suddenly darted from the street once more to the sidewalk, and apparently right into the arms of a dozen men or more who came trooping out of a saloon, to see what was the matter.

In an instant there was a mob of hundreds ravening around the open door of that saloon, shouting, running this way and that, or peering about in a bewildered manner.

In some mysterious manner the Chinamen had vanished altogether.

Where had the fugitives gone to?

The earth seemed to have swallowed them up from the moment they struck the sidewalk. After that no one had seen them, and though the search made was both diligent and long, no trace of them was to be found.

And of all the wails from the disappointed crowd, that of the boy hoodlum rose loudest. Not content with coming off so much better than he had reason to hope for, he was heart-broken because he could not again thrust his throat into danger.

Meantime, what had become of the Highbinders?

They were safe enough from pursuit, and a block away.

They had edged into that crowd from the saloon like ghosts, and had actually reached the next, and near-by, corner unseen.

A few steps further and a tall house arose above them, with a balcony projecting over the sidewalk, and a fire-escape running up above the balcony.

The foremost of the fugitives gave a leap, and catching the cornice of the balcony by his hands swung himself up, and then over the low railing.

His companion followed suit, and before the crowd realized their escape they were scrambling over the roof of the building, and gaining a lodgment on the top of the next one.

Light and darkness seemed all one to them; and cat-like they were never afraid for their footing. When the muffled sounds of the mob no longer came to their ears they were ready to escape by another ladder which seemed to lead downward into a court.

The two paused a moment and looked around them, evidently trying to make out the spot.

It seemed to be familiar on second glance, for they looked at each other, nodded, and said something in a foreign tongue.

Then, they let themselves down the ladder, and after again staring about, stole toward a shuttered window near by and listened.

All was silent within, and at a little hasty work the shutter yielded to their efforts, revealing the darkened panes beyond.

"'Melican Highbindleel! 'Tat belly good. Maybe he meet t'e leal ting. Eh, eh-hoy!"

The idea seemed a joke, for both chuckled, and then were silent.

As they listened there came the faint report of a pistol, fired somewhere beyond the walls, and a tumult and noise of struggling feet.

The sounds were a warning, but they did not seem to affright.

On the contrary, the two laughed grimly to each other, and then sprang in through the opening left by the sash they had raised. They knew the spot well enough for all practical purposes, and it seemed to them they might have business there.

The room was a small one, and empty of all its occupants. Had it been light enough to obtain a clearer view it would have seemed to be securely built.

They must have thought of this, for they laughed again. Then, they crept toward a dimly seen door on the other side, and remained crouching."

CHAPTER XXXII.

JAPHET GETS HIS REWARD.

THE Damber Cove, as they thought him to be, was the special object of the attack. There was never a thought in the minds of these men that the two were intruders, for the Damber was a recognized factor in the operations of the gang, however much he and Pete Parker might be at variance.

But there had been some words between him and Pete, even before the scene in the saloon, and the bad blood could only end in something like this.

The cross-eyed man was a trifle screened, and Pete did not recognize him. Japhet had various grades of men in his list, and this rough-looking fellow might well be one more of them.

But the rough-looking fellow, though apparently staring at Pete, was really keeping his irregular optics trained where they would do the most good. He saw what was coming as soon as Parker did, and was ready for it.

With a terrible swing he planted his right full on the neck of the nearest of the men with knives, and then, shifting a step, shot out his left, straight and hard, landing on the chin.

Two men "went to grass," in ring parlance.

Moll was forgotten. Pete drew his pistol and fired so quickly he had no time to take aim, and there was a rush from both sides of the house, and a furious conflict, the noise of which startled Japhet, and brought him hurrying to the scene.

When he appeared the room was partly obscured by drifting smoke, and there was a mob in the middle of the floor.

The reinforcements came none too soon, for Trinnfador and the detective had been more than holding their own, and so long as weapons were not used, and they could keep the gang at striking distance, they had the better show to worry their way through.

Grigson lost no time. He saw this was a fight to the death, and that Trinnfador and the supposed Damber Cove were arrayed against the rest.

Whatever might be the good qualities of the two men, it looked as though they had to be settled then and there, or his own safety as well as that of the rest would be in peril. He drew his knife and crept along warily behind the crowd.

Tim and Neddy were not backward, either, dashing in to aid Parker, from whose hand the cross-eyed man had knocked the pistol, and was now pressing him closely, though he had not yet found the chance to give a knock-out blow. Lum came to the door, looked in, saw how the fight was going, and kept his distance.

Grigson crouched and crept, like the snake that he was, and at what seemed to him to be the right time, rose for a spring, holding his blade at a ready. The back of the detective was dangerously near, and he thought he was certain to reach it.

It was a dangerous moment for the younger Primrose, for he saw nothing of his danger. Abednego did, however.

Disengaging himself from Pete he gave a wonderful spring, and a vicious kick which landed full on Japhet's wrist, forcing the knife from his hand.

Then, two men threw themselves on the back of the cross-eyed man, and in the struggle he was borne away, while Grigson, not disabled though disarmed, dropped with his arms around the legs of the younger Primrose, and before the gripe could be broken, or any effective resistance could be offered, pulled him to the floor.

When Primrose had risen after his encounter with the cross-eyed man, he had returned the false mustache to its place, but the work was not as well done as it should have been, and in the struggle it had slipped off once more. As he went down a cry arose:

"That's not the Damber. It's a detective. Death to the dog!"

Had it not been for Trinnfador he would have been in the very tightest of places; and it looked doubtful for a moment whether the cross-eyed man could save him.

Yet, Abednego was in his element, and was enjoying himself after his own fashion to the top of his bent.

He swung the two men half-way around, and then flung himself backward, crushing their bodies against a window-sill with a force that made their holds relax. As they fell away he rushed forward, striking as he came, and before they knew how it was done the detective was again on his feet.

But this time he seemed to lose courage, for so soon as he was free he started for the door, to which the way seemed open.

"Don't let him get away!" yelled "the boss;" but no one could reach the flying Primrose. Lum had shrunk away when he saw how vigorously the battle was being waged, and the detective was out in the hall, and apparently free to make his escape, before the thugs had reached the door.

Trinnfador was not forgotten, two or three holding him in play, but the detective was

the greatest object of attention. It would be a terrible thing if he got away alive.

But, Primrose had no idea of getting away. He reached the door, but he went no further.

Flinging it open he blew a shrilly-trilling blast on a whistle he had placed between his lips. After that—Abednego had backed him up nobly, and Primrose did not mean to desert him.

The whistle appeared to be a warning as well as a signal.

It meant that this was no simple excursion on the part of the man who had so boldly played the part of the Damber Cove. It was a carefully-planned raid, no doubt, and there was little time for anything but retreat. A panic seized Pete Parker and his men, and without hesitation they burst away in a headlong flight, pouring out of the door into the hall before Primrose had time to turn.

Out by the rear door they went, and scattered along the alleyway to the rear of the lot, according to their qualities of speed and endurance. Grigson and his two Chinese-looking allies were left to fight their battle alone.

The leader in crime hesitated. He was not ready to die trying to make his teeth meet, and yet was loth to flee. Tim and Neddy were occupied with Abednego, who had fastened on them with a vise-like grip, and the way seemed to be open since Primrose had not yet made his reappearance. He hesitated—but it was not for long.

Whether his own disguise had been penetrated he did not know; but, even if it had not been it would do him but little good. It was hardly likely that of all the men who had been in the den not one would be captured; and one man could give away the game.

Meantime, he had always been prepared for just such an emergency.

If he could evade immediate pursuit he had a tidy little fortune secured on the other side of the continent, and his personality could be dropped the moment he got a fair offing from the spot. He lingered no longer.

He sprung to the door which had as yet remained closed.

The bolts and bars there were but a blind. Pressing a spring the door flew open, and he passed through into the narrow room on the other side. While the police were picking up the rest of the gang he imagined he could follow a different route, and get himself clean away.

He could have done so had it not been for a factor he had forgotten.

Abednego was fully occupied holding on to what he had in his hands. He was afraid to let go of either man lest he should lose him before getting in a knock-down blow, and he found that he could not fling them both to the floor.

They were stalwart ruffians, for the terrible trade they had followed.

Primrose was coming, but had delayed a moment to note the direction the fugitives were taking, before turning in to help Trinnfador. He had seen at a glance through the open door that the cross-eyed man was holding a little more than his own, and by the time he had twisted his fingers in Neddy's collar Japhet might have been on the next block.

As the door closed behind Japhet, two figures sprang up from the floor where they had been crouching, and hurled themselves upon him.

He tried to struggle, but the gripe upon him was like iron. Silently and steadily he was forced down upon the floor.

"Mellican mannee no play Highbindlee any moah!" was hissed into his ears.

He now lay still, his pockets turned inside out, while two dark figures flitted away, laughing at the police they heard on the other side of the door.

Grigson's Highbinders had been a pretty fair imitation, but these were the real thing.

When the door went down before the blows of an ax, the detective found the stiffening body there and turned silently back. He fancied he had come about to the end of the trail, and did not like what he had discovered.

As he turned he was shaking his head gravely.

"Don't worry," grunted the cross-eyed

man. "Prehaps, ef he hed bin 'a' leetle bit gamer we mou't 'a' found we'd 'a' bit off a leetle bit more ner we could 'a' chawed. Hyer's one apiece fur us, an' ther gang's bu'sted. Ain't that good ernuff?"

The handcuffs had been snapped on the counterfeit Highbinders, and they were sitting sullenly on the floor, waiting to see what would be the next move.

"Good-enough as far as it goes, but there is more that must follow. I suspect there are several prisoners somewhere about, and the next thing is to find them."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE LAST ROUND.

If the detective had known how thoroughly well-hidden was the way to the cell which contained the captives he might have been still more troubled. Of their presence somewhere about the premises he only had a suspicion, but it was a strong one, and leaving Trinnfador to guard the two men he went over the house.

In an upper room he found what he was certain had been the quarters of some of them, and the place had been but lately vacated. It began to look as though they had been moved, and he had come a little too late. He went down the stairs, and did not stop until he came to the cellar.

There was nothing there which could give him a clue though he examined every part of it narrowly. He would have gone away baffled and perplexed had it not been that suddenly he heard the muffled sound of a pistol, behind the wall at the very spot where he was standing!

He ran hastily up to the room above, and caught up the ax.

"Follow me, and let those dogs lie!" he exclaimed to Trinnfador. "The fun is not all over yet."

When Lum saw that the battle was all over but the shouting, and that it had gone against "the boss," he turned away and went softly down the stairs, at the bottom of which he remained crouching for a little, in the darkness, with lantern hidden under his coat.

Lum could move about the house like a ghost, and he had slipped by the younger Primrose without being seen. When he knew by the silence above that the flurry was finished, he stole across the floor, found the secret door in the wall, and entered the narrow passage, making every thing secure behind him.

"Guess it is time for Lum to go out of the wet; and there's nothing like going in good company. Three of them, and all womankind. My, what a screaming there will be when my fingers begin to get in their work."

His eyes glowed with the fire of the madness that was in him, and had Grigson seen him now he would hardly have cared to have trusted himself within reach of his clutch.

He felt in his pocket and produced a key, the duplicate of the one he had given Grigson. He was about to let down the bars; though he had no idea of turning the animals loose.

Inside the mother and daughter crouched together at the sound of his coming, while Cissy stood behind them, her hand hidden in the folds of her tattered dress.

Lum strode in with something like a howl, and in his madness said more than he had intended. There was a scream from Mrs. Chase, and a low cry from Florence, as he held the lantern up so that its light partially revealed his face, and the claw-like hand he held outstretched, to seize the elder woman by the throat.

Then, Cissy's hand came up, her finger pulled on the trigger, and it was the report of her revolver which the younger Primrose heard.

Lum fell back at the shot, and Cissy caught up the lantern.

"This hyer way!" she exclaimed. "Mebbe he ain't hurt ez bad ez he looks, an' we must be gittin' out ov this afore he comes to."

Their flight was stopped when they came to the door, which all their efforts failed to move; but, just as they were despairing they heard the detective on the other side with an ax. A moment more and they were at liberty.

There was a chance that some of the gang would come creeping back when they found that no irruption of the police had followed; but the risk had been run, and when the detectives returned they found Neddy and Tim where they had been left.

Neddy recognized the situation probably, for he growled something about the rest of the police; and scowled worse than ever when Primrose laughingly answered:

"This is the rest of us. I knew your fellows would never have the nerve to stay if they thought the cops were onto them, and I went out and whistled for pure good luck."

"An' brung it, too, I reckon," added Trinnfador, who was looking curiously at the feminines—including Moll, who had regained her senses, and was holding tightly to Cissy.

"I hope so; but I'd like to know what your interest was in the matter. I thought at first you were one of Grigson's men, but from what you said I suppose you must have pipe to lay of your own."

"Oh, I ain't a worryin' much. I dropped onto ther fack thet Jim Trainor hed lef some rocks w'ich he war afear'd ter take along to ther place whar they might melt. Bein a full brother ov ther widdier, I tho't I'd look ther matter up a bit, ez I mou't hev a centerest. But, ez Meely seems ter be able ter stan' good fortun' yit, an' hez a fambly ov her own ter help her do it, guess I'll retire."

Of course the affair created a great deal of excitement when the history of it was noised abroad.

For one thing it made the people a little more lenient toward the true Highbinders, when they learned of the crimes of the head of the false ones, and perhaps Japhet was credited with having directed more murders than he was actually responsible for. The poetic justice of his ending was duly appreciated, and if the two Celestials who did him to death had allowed their names to come before the public they would possibly have been the recipients of a testimonial worthy of their distinguished services—very different in fact from the one furnished to the unfortunate Tim and Neddy.

With Grigson dead, and certain papers recovered which had been stolen, the mystery of the plot he had laid was of secondary importance, though it was pretty well ventilated before the younger Primrose got done with it.

Years before, Japhet and Chase—or Trainor as he should properly be called—had been partners in certain matters of business, some of them more or less nefarious as it happened.

Chase had left suddenly, for cogent reasons, and Japhet had fallen heir to his property by the law of get what you can, as well as by certain indefinite articles to which Chase's name was undoubtedly affixed.

The real estate had been gobbled without much difficulty, but it remained for Stafford to unearth certain stocks which had risen to great value, and through the confusion of names elsewhere explained had decided that they belonged to his niece. Indeed, it had not been proved differently to this day, since the whole matter was arranged by the millionaire to the satisfaction of all parties concerned, papers to that effect being drawn up and signed.

Of course, Lew Stafford survived.

The morning after Alta's return he was weak but smiling as she read to him in the papers the particulars of the arrest of the burly ruffian who was suspected of being one of the assailants of the magnate.

He was strong enough to have him released, however, without an hour's delay, with a request to come to see him if possible.

When Bedrock slouched in, Stafford tried to give him a stern glance but failed.

"Get off those clothes as soon as possible and then go home!" he whispered. "If you stay here a week longer you will kill me, sure."

"Thankee, Lewis; but ther clothes are comfyble, an' I'll continner ter wear 'em tell I hev redeemed me laurels. Me go home fresh frum a failure, an' a night in the tank? Not ef the court knows herself! I've

loss' me selfrespex an' am fit fur nothin' but a low-down tramp. I'll jest send ther madam a check fur a hundred thousand, an go back ter ther mines. Mebbe I kin find Pony Taylor."

It seemed no use to tell Bedrock that he had met with a success that ought to have been equal to his wildest expectations. He appeared to be thoroughly disgusted with himself and everybody else, unless it might be Miss Alta.

With her he chatted awhile after the easy manner he assumed with his easier costume, and then went away.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"A FOOL FOR LUCK."

It was evening again, and Bedrock went surging down the street after his most consequential style. He had thought, in his chagrin, of leaving the city by the first train, but a little reflection calmed him considerably, and he decided to take a night around town before making up his mind as to his future course.

"Le'ss see," he was muttering to himself.

"Mebbe ther on'y great original are teetotally ruled outen ther game; an' mebbe he's on'y temp'rarily onder a cloud. I hed sot me heart on goin' back to ther bosom ov me famby, an' ef I could git squar' with ther world I mout go yit. What's ther matter with hevin' one more try at it hyer? Ef I could come off with flyin' colors I wouldn't be 'fraid ter look Lester an' ther balan's ov 'em in ther face. Luck be with me, an' thar's no tellin' what ni'te 'll bring forth."

He had a pretty fair knowledge of the city, and the places where a man of his seeming caliber would be either welcome or tolerated, and as the time he had allotted for his efforts was limited he wanted to make no false moves.

This way and that he turned, but his course was always in the direction of a dive where it seemed to him he stood a chance of meeting Pete Parker.

To be sure, after the extinction of Japhet Grigson, Parker seemed to be of minor importance; yet, with him at large there might be danger that the game against Stafford and his family was not altogether over. Pete had been deep in his leader's secrets, and was a nervy villain besides.

Of course, after the friction between the King-Pin of Tramps and a man like Parker there was danger venturing into the lairs of the latter; and just at this moment Primrose felt it in his bones that he was down on his luck.

For almost the first time in his life he had come out behind at what seemed to be the wind up of the game, and it was possible that he might go on from bad to worse; but he was willing to run the chances, and trust to something turning up whereby he might retrieve his laurels.

For these reasons he was in a more cautious frame of mind than was usual with him when he put his head in at the door of Cale Van Wyck's den, and took a survey of the ground.

At a glance he saw there were enough there already of his stamp to render his presence not altogether an unwelcome surprise, and after a moment's hesitation he advanced boldly into the room.

More money changed hands there than might be imagined from the looks of the place and its frequenters.

The air was blue with tobacco smoke, and a strong odor of bad whisky pervaded the dirty room.

At several small tables men were engaged at poker, while in one corner he could hear the rattle of "the bones," and the excited talk of a crowd that was interested in a game of "craps." He could distinctly hear one man shout: "I'll go you five he passes!" and it sounded like advice that might be worth the taking.

Leaving the players to their own devices Bedrock sauntered to the bar at the further end of the room, and planted himself there with his arms akimbo, and a comical smile on his face.

"Down with your dust if you mean sportin'," said the bartender, who seemed to think this a prelude to a strike for a free drink, or what would come to the same thing.

"No credit here. If you ain't fixed for business get out of the way for some one who is. There's no time for foolishness."

The tone was sharp, and manner decisive. Johnny had served a long apprenticeship at his trade, and thought he knew a dead beat when he saw one, and was able to decide what to do with him.

"W'o's axin' fur credit?" was the smiling response.

"Reckon ef Ole Time's Rocks war ter ax yer ter hang up a leetle one fur him you wouldn't be so hard-hearted ez ter waltz him out in, ther cold."

"But I ain't axin' yer ter hang 'em up right now, though I dunno w'ot I may be doin' afore mornin'. All I wants ter know ef I draw me check fur a hundred thousand, ef you'll take one four-fingered snort outen it an' gi'mme ther change fur ther balan's?"

"Drop that, old man, or I'll go for you with a bung-starter. Git! We don't keep your sort here longer than it takes to fire 'em out; and when we do that we fire them hard. Sherry, now, or there will be blood on the moon."

"Not afore thet drink comes in; an' ef so be yer heart are harder than ther millst'un yer reads about—thar's yer hon'yrarium. Set it up afore I git mad an' howls."

With a great whack Bedrock slapped a twenty-dollar coin upon the bar, and raising his hand so the glitter of the coin could be seen below it he stood grinning more amiably than ever.

That put a different face on the matter, and the decanter came down in short order.

As Bedrock poured out the regulation five fingers, and something added, he leaned forward and asked in a low tone:

"An' say, pard, hez Parker bin hyer ter-night. Him an' me's thick ez thieves, an'—an' I wouldn't be wide off ef I say he's a needin' me."

As he spoke he gulped down his benzine greedily, winking with one bleared and bloodshot eye as he looked around his tumbler.

Johnny scanned the outlandish figure dubiously.

"Folks must think I keep Pete Parker in my pocket. There's been a regular torch-light procession passing this way to night, and every manjack that was in it was asking for him. There was a man here not five minutes ago that was putting it to me, and I thought I'd have to call in the cops to get rid of him. P'rhaps you're the same kind."

The trail looked promising.

For some reason Pete's name was slowly acting like an open sesame. A little more crowding and Johnny might open up what he knew. Bedrock crowded.

"Tha's all right, pard. That war jest one ov ther things I wanted to know. Now then, post me up ef he found him an' I'll hev ter git a hussel on. Thar's biz' in ther air, an' ef I don't git thar Pete may be in a box; an' I'll be short me night's wages."

As he spoke Primrose gave a peculiar sign with his fingers. It was one he had picked up among the slums, and he thought it could do no harm just here, and might do good.

The effect seemed to be magical. Johnny bent over the bar, and spoke in a lower tone than ever, though his voice had fallen from the time they had begun to speak about Pete Parker.

"I don't know yer face, but I reckon you must be all right, and the cove I was to look out for. Pete's in the back room, and the fellow is in there with him."

Johnny told more than he meant when he gave an involuntary toss of chin, and twist of his eye. They gave Bedrock his bearings, and without further questions he turned toward a low doorway, which was reached by two or three downward steps.

On the panel of the door he rapped once sharply with his knuckle, and then trying the latch found no trouble in clearing the way.

As he had expected, he found himself in a narrow passage; but where it led to was more than he could guess. There was nothing to do but to trust to his luck, which seemed to be coming in again. Without hesitation he strode on.

There was no attempt at concealment about the place, and it was lighted by a couple of vilely-smelling oil lamps, which

flickered with the slight draft Bedrock could feel blowing from the further end.

Without hesitation he turned out the nearest light.

"Ett's alltergether too cl'ar," he muttered to himself.

"S'pose I'll find a 'open door at t'other end, an' no sign lef' ter show which way ter turn. Pity I couldn't a da'st ter ax Johnny another ques'shun, ez ter what that same back room war. But it wouldn't a' did, an' I wouldn't put it past him ter sendin' one ov ther toughs ter see ef I knowed ez much ez I let on. An'—reckon I'm a-hittin' ther high places ther fu'st clatter. Thar's sign now."

He heard a hasty step from the further end of the passage, and crouched low. Perhaps the man Pete Parker was looking for was on the way.

The step came nearer, and as the man passed the lamp at that end of the hallway Rufus could distinctly hear his hand dragging along the wall to guide his steps through the obscurity, while he uttered a muttered curse at the chance which had left the place in semi-darkness.

Bedrock was invisible, but he knew there was no chance of his being passed without notice. The hall was too narrow for that. He nerved himself for the contact, and an instant later would have struck out, but the step ceased, and he heard the sharp click of a spring.

Instantly he suspected a secret door, and had the belt that kept his ragged panatloons to his portly waist off, ready for use. A door did fly open, and the man passed through it; but before it could swing to, Bedrock's belt lay across the sill.

The door closed with a spring, and the man never noticed that the lock had not shot to its place. There was something beyond which caused him to hurry forward—and to bring Bedrock after him in hot pursuit. This passage led right under an alleyway, to the cellar of the adjoining house, where there was something going on of the kind which the King-Pin Tramp always liked to have a hand in. A human life was in danger.

Rapidly as he moved the man in front was more rapid still, and there was a momentary gleam of light as a door opened, and then closed again, cutting in two a gurgling cry, which was half heard in the utter darkness.

Rufus knew there was no time to be looking for secret springs, or hidden bolts. The light had given him his bearings, and there was but one thing to do.

He turned his head sideways, threw forward one of his brawny shoulders and shot forward like the human cannon-ball that he was.

There was a fearful crash, a bursting of bolts, and a splintering of wood, and over and through the broken door the King-Pin plunged headlong into the room.

As always, he was on hand at the right moment.

In the center of the room was an open trap. One man stood in front of it with a raised sandbag, while over it two men at arm's length held a third, and in the face of the intended victim Primrose recognized the countenance of a man he had left not long before in the mines on the Sunken River—Pony Taylor.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BEDROCK'S HARVEST.

THERE was no time for thought.

A blow from the sandbag might be as deadly as a fall through the trap; and it was hard to tell how to escape one or both.

Had Bedrock sought to recover his balance the sand-club must have fallen. Instead, he threw himself forward with a mighty hand-spring, and shot both feet full into the small of the back of the bludgeoner.

The result was better than he could have dreamed of. The fellow shot forward a trifle sooner than the hands clutching Pony Taylor could loosen their gripe, and plunged downward through the open trap, caroming against Taylor as the latter fell.

There was some life yet in the sport from the mines, for as the contact forced him away from the mouth of the trap his arms touched and then closed around one of the men who had been holding him. The other man drop-

ped to a straightforward blow from Bedrock, who shouted as he struck:

"Hole ont'er him, Pony, but don't kill him! That's Pete Parker, an' thar's money onder his livin' hide. Bedrock, thar King-Pin, Bedrock thar pure an' onerdulterated, are 'round an' kin take yer part tell ther bee gits outen yer bonnit."

He spoke in haste, for he knew the terrible power that lay in the arms of the sport, and he was none too soon. Pony Taylor, with his gripe once fixed could crush the life out of an ordinary man; and he was doing it with Pete Parker.

He recognized Bedrock, and after a momentary hesitation suffered himself to be guided by him. There was no inducement to linger there, and any talking the two might have to do had better be done somewhere else. In a moment, as it were, Pony had recovered from the treacherous blow which had nearly knocked him senseless; and with Parker between them, they hurriedly made their exit.

"Yer got a letter from Grigson, did yer?" asked Bedrock, when they were once safely on the street.

"How did you know?" was the quick response.

"By ther rollin' wheels, but he war makin' a clean swath! Yer ont'er knowed better than ter be got inter sich a trap, though. I tho't Pony Taylor come ov age some years ago."

"So I ought, with the pile of coin on me—a thousand even—that he asked me to bring if I wanted to get the papers in the Trainer matter. He said they were worth that to me—and so they were. And he said they were worth nothing to him, which I am not so sure of. The trouble is, I haven't got 'em; and I don't believe he had either."

"I'll tell you who has, though," was the prompt retort.

"Lew Stafford. An' he wants ter see yer bad. Fact are, I war jest goin' ter start fur ther Sunken River deestrick in ther mornin', ter find yer. You want ter see him fust thing in ther mornin'. You hear me?"

"I hear you, and if that's the dead level you are giving me I guess I can't do better than take your advice. But I want you on hand to help me out as a witness if we push this thing against this fellow in tow. I'm in a land of law, now, and I don't intend to let him down a bit easier than the law allows."

"Witness nothin'. Thar will be 'nuff ag'in' him ter hang him five time over, 'thout your leetle racket comin' up. He hed ther job laid out fur him afore Grigson went to pot, an' tho't he'd kerry it out fur that same leetle thou. I'll han' him over ter ther p'leese, an' then sherry me nibs. I'm goin' fur ther bosum ov me fambly, an' I'm a-goin' right now, jess ez I be."

"And they will be glad to see you among the four hundred in New York," smiled Pony, who knew something of Bedrock's connections.

"Cain't help it. I tried ter start respekt'erble, an' war switched offen ther trail afore it got fairly warm. When I git ter Courtlan' ferry 'll be time enough ter put my heavy harness on, an' tell that time I'm Bedrock, thar King-Pin, fat, raggid, an' sassy."

And he kept his word.

Pony Taylor's business with the railroad magnate was settled after a manner that was short and sweet. They had come together before, (as chronicled in DIME LIBRARY No. 707, "The Rival Rovers,") and Stafford greeted him as warmly as his condition would allow.

"Don't say another word," was the hearty answer when Taylor had opened the subject of his affairs.

"There will be an inventory of the present worth of all the Trainor property, and I will guarantee you and your sister get all the papers call for, if it takes half I am worth."

The magnanimity of the offer took Pony's breath away, for indeed, with the property divided up as it had been, and the titles clouded, he recognized that without it there might have been some pretty tough nuts for law and equity to crack.

The interests of the Taylor family were not so easily understood. In the will which Mrs. Chase had unearthed there were certain legacies to them, and the simplest way

to explain them was that in some way the family had been made Trainor's victims, and this was either an effort to set a wrong right, or to stop investigations in a direction where there were other and greater wrongs to be unearthed.

At all events, there was in the contract before spoken of a clause which provided for attention to the matter when the time came.

Triunfador would have been provided for, but somehow he tired of the town, and the last heard of him he was a vagabond in the mining regions.

As for Oldcort, he had done his share of the work before Bedrock got into the game, and he worked with the younger Primrose afterward, assisting in the silent seizure, and subsequent private arrest of the Damber Cove to send him to the tanks while the detective stepped into his shoes. There was a clear case or two against the dead-game man, and in spite of his nerve he served a term of years behind stone walls, in the interests of the State.

Florence was not exactly the kind of stuff the grander heroines are made of, but she suited Lawrence well enough, and in due course of time became Mrs. Oldcort.

Hank was discharged from the hospital, better but by no means well, without being identified as the long-ago criminal against whom an indictment was still pending. He and his wife drifted away together, but Cissy was left behind as the ward of the Chases, and their gratitude is making a true woman out of the child of the gutters. And at her worst there were worse in the world. Let us hope she will be happy.

THE END.

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